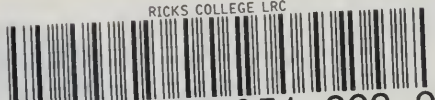
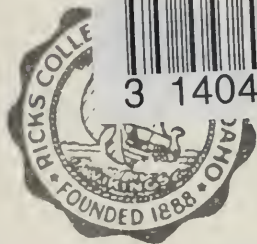


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ESSAY ON MILTON

by

Thomas Babington Macaulay

Ed. by William P. Trent

Boston, Chicago

Houghton, Mifflin and company

INTRODUCTION.

THERE can be little doubt that Lord Macaulay is the most popular writer of English prose that this century has produced. Thousands of copies of his *History of England* are still sold every year, and travellers tell us that if an Australian settler possesses three books only, the first two will be the Bible and Shakespeare, and the third, Macaulay's *Essays*. And yet his authority as a critic and historian has been shaken, and his capacity as a poet — for his *Lays of Ancient Rome* is a very popular book — seriously questioned. Nor is his popularity confined to any one circle of readers. Cultivated men and women in their conversation and writings assume a knowledge of his works as a matter of course, but the intelligent laboring man, who is striving for an education, is equally, perhaps more, familiar with them. It is plain that a writer who makes such a wide and lasting appeal deserves careful study, and that a brief survey of his life cannot be without interest.

Thomas Babington Macaulay was born October 25, 1800, at Rothley Temple in Leicestershire. His father Zachary was a Scotchman of probity and talents, who was a distinguished promoter of abolition. Macaulay, therefore, came honestly by the middle-class virtues and defects that are so salient in his character. He was a precocious, nay rather a wonderful child, but does not appear to have been spoiled. His memory was prodigious and his reading enormous, while his faculty for turning out hundreds of respectable verses was simply phenomenal. After a happy period of schooling he entered Cambridge, where he won prizes for verse, and made a reputation for himself as a scholar and speaker, but failed of the highest honors on

account of his inaptitude for mathematics. He graduated at twenty-two, was elected a Fellow of Trinity two years later, and the next year startled the world by his brilliant essay on Milton in the *Edinburgh Review*. From this time his career was one of almost unbroken success. He was called to the bar in 1826, but gave more time to his writing and to his political aspirations than to his profession. In 1830 he was elected to the House of Commons through the patronage of Lord Lansdowne, and began his career as a staunch Whig at one of the most important crises in English history, — that of the first Reform Bill.

It is quite plain that if Macaulay had taken seriously to politics at this juncture he would have made a name for himself among English statesmen, or at least among English orators. The speeches he delivered were enthusiastically received, he stood high with the ministers of a party just coming into power, he had the courage of his convictions, he had the wide erudition that has been a tradition with English statesmen, and he had the practical ability to conduct a political canvass (for the new borough of Leeds); but he liked the adulation of society a little too well, and his income was not sufficient to let him bide his time. Dinners at Holland House and breakfasts with Rogers were delightful, no doubt, as delightful as the letters in which he described them to his favorite sister Hannah; and so too was the praise he got for his articles in the *Edinburgh*; but this devotion to society and literature could hardly have been kept up along with an entirely serious and absorbing pursuit of political honors. He was probably well advised, therefore, when in 1834 he accepted the presidency of a new law commission for India and a membership of the Supreme Council of Calcutta. It meant banishment, but it meant also a princely income of which half could be saved. So he set out, taking his sister Hannah with him, for he was a bachelor, discharged his duties admirably, and returned to England in 1838.

On his return he reëntered Parliament and served with distinction but not with conspicuous success. His genius had been diverted and his desires were more than ever divided. He obtained a seat in Lord John Russell's cabinet and supported the Whigs on all great questions, but he was better known as the author of the *Lays of Ancient Rome* (1842) and the *Essays*. He lost his seat for Edinburgh in 1847, having been too outspoken and liberal in his views, yet this meant little to one who was a student by nature and who was about to bring out the first two volumes of the most popular history ever written (1849). The remaining decade of his life was practically the only period in which his energies were undivided. He was indeed reëlected to Parliament from Edinburgh without his solicitation, and he was raised to the peerage in 1857, being the first man to receive such an honor mainly for literary work; but he did little besides labor on his *History* and make notable contributions to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Other honors of various sorts were showered on him and his fame reached the proportions of Byron's, but his health began to fail and he did not live long enough to experience any reaction. He died of heart trouble on December 28, 1859, in the fulness of his intellectual powers, and leaving his great history incomplete.

The chief reasons for Macaulay's tremendous popularity are not far to seek. He possessed a style which whether metallic, as has been claimed, or not, is at all times clear and strenuous. He simply commanded attention by his positive assurance of statement, and, when once he had obtained it, took care not to lose it through any obscurity. Rather than indulge in qualifications that might embarrass the reader, he chose, it may be unconsciously, to state half truths as whole truths, and to play the advocate while posing as the critic. The world has always loved the man who knows his own mind, and Macaulay knew his and proclaimed the fact loudly. Then again the world has always loved the strong man who is not too far aloof from it to

hold many of its prejudices and opinions. This was just the case with Macaulay, who was little more than a middle-class Englishman with vastly magnified powers. Subtlety of intellect and delicacy of taste were as far from him as they have always been from a majority of his countrymen, but dogmatic assurance and optimistic confidence in whatever was English were his in full measure. The very qualities that made Tennyson for a long time eclipse Browning made Macaulay eclipse Carlyle, and in both cases a natural reaction set in. Critics called attention to the artificial balance of Macaulay's sentences, and to the brazen ring of his verses; they pointed out his blindness to much that is highest and purest in literature; they convicted him of partisanship and made short work of his assumptions of omniscience. In all this they had considerable truth on their side, but as was natural they went to extremes, and the pendulum of opinion is now swinging in Macaulay's direction again. Mr. Matthew Arnold was right when he insisted on Macaulay's middle-class limitations, but he went too far when he practically denied that Macaulay had any claim to the title of poet. Schoolboys and older readers have not been entirely deluded when they have been carried away by the swing of *Ivry* and of *Horatius*. The essay on Milton has done good to thousands of readers, though its critical value is slight in the extreme. The third chapter of the *History*, describing the England of 1685, remains one of the most brilliant pieces of historical narration ever penned, no matter how partisan Macaulay may have been in the remainder of the work. However much his assumptions of omniscience may vex us, we must perforce admit that no modern specialist has ever known his peculiar subject better than Macaulay knew his chosen period of history, the reigns of James II. and William III. Theorize as much as we will about the pellucid beauties of an unelaborated style, we must confess that if the object of writing be to reach and influence men, Macaulay's balanced,

antithetical style is one of the most perfect instruments of expression ever made use of by speaker or writer. We may complain that Macaulay often leaves his subject and wanders off into space, but we have to confess with Mr. Saintsbury that he is one of the greatest stimulators of other minds that ever lived. In short we must conclude that although the brilliant historian and essayist has no such claim to our veneration as a great poet like Wordsworth, or a great novelist like Scott, or a great prophet like Carlyle, nevertheless his place is with the honored names of literature, and his fame is no proper subject for carping and ungenerous criticism.

With regard now to his individual works the highest praise must of course be given to his *History*. In spite of its incompleteness and its partisan character it is plainly one of the most notable of the world's historical compositions. It yields to the great work of Gibbon, but it would be hard to name any other history in English that is its superior in what is after all the essential point, the art of narration. Macaulay claimed that his favorite Addison might have written a great novel, but the claim might better be made for Macaulay himself, since he was a born story teller. Unkind critics have intimated that he drew upon his imagination for his characters, and the public has always confessed that the *History* is as interesting as a novel. We shall not, however, go so far as to maintain that the *History* is a novel or that Lord Macaulay was a great novelist spoiled; but we are at liberty to contend that the great secret of the historian's success lay in his comprehension of the fact that to make the past really live it must be treated in much the same way in which a novelist would treat the materials gathered for his story.

Perhaps enough has been said about our author's scanty poetry, which appeals chiefly through its swing and vigor, but the *Essays* will naturally demand somewhat fuller treatment. Their main value lies probably in the stimulation they give to the intellectual powers of any reader who

has a spark of literary appreciation or the slightest desire to learn. Macaulay's erudition is so great and he wears it so lightly that one is instinctively led to wish for a similar mental equipment, and to fancy that it cannot be very difficult of attainment. Whatever Macaulay likes is described in such alluring terms that a reader feels that it would really be too bad for him not to know more about it. The truth of this statement is amusingly illustrated by an anecdote, given in the *Life and Letters*, of a gentleman who after reading the review of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* sent a servant after the book. Macaulay was sitting near him in the library of the Athenæum Club and enjoyed the incident. But, besides their alluring style and their power of mental stimulation, the *Essays* have the advantage of treating in the main great subjects that people wish to know about, and treating them in such a way as to impart a large amount of compact and very useful information. Perhaps this is the chief reason why men who are self-educated are so familiar with Macaulay. Such readers care very little for the nicer shadings of criticism, but they do care a great deal to have available information and positive opinions furnished them on the great men and events of the past. Hence Macaulay's essay on Bacon will survive the monumental answer that Mr. Spedding gave it; hence his essays on Clive and Warren Hastings will for generations supply the public with all the Indian history it is likely to demand.

After the *Milton* Macaulay wrote about forty essays, all of which appeared in the *Edinburgh* except the five contributed to the *Encyclopædia Britannica*. They fall into two main classes, literary and historical, with a few of miscellaneous character, such as that on Sadler's *Law of Population*. It is a striking proof of Macaulay's genius that they are nearly all as well worth reading to-day as they were when they appeared between the yellow and blue covers. As a rule a review is unreadable a few years after its appearance, as is proved by the dust that settles upon the volumes of such contemporaries of Macaulay's as Mack-

intosh and Talfourd. Their reviews were duly collected into volumes and they were included with Macaulay among the "British Essayists," but they are dead while Macaulay lives. The quarterlies are still published, and their ponderous reviews are read by leisurely people, and immediately forgotten, for there is no form of literature that has less vitality. Yet Macaulay's reviews are still read by thousands and keep alive the names of books and men that would else have long since perished. It is a remarkable literary phenomenon. While Macaulay did not originate the discursive literary review, he first gave it life and popularity, and may be compared to a trunk that puts forth many branches. But the branches are all dead or dying, while the trunk seems to be endowed with perpetual life and vigor. Explain it as we may, the fact remains that the essays on Clive and Pitt and Warren Hastings, on Milton and Addison and Johnson, on Barère and Mr. Robert Montgomery's Poems, although belonging by nature to the most ephemeral category of literature, are as fully entitled to be called classics as any compositions written in the English language during the present century.

Four of the best of these classical essays are included in this Series, and a careful study of them with the aid of the introductions and notes will initiate the student into much of the secret of Macaulay's power and charm. He should not, however, rest content with them, but should read at least most of the *Essays* and the poems, and should then go on to complete the five volumes of the *History*. Even then he will not have all of Macaulay, for the two delightful volumes of the *Life and Letters*, edited by Mr. Trevelyan, will remain to be enjoyed. Mr. Cotter Morison's excellent biography in the *English Men of Letters* will also be found worth perusing, and if a good analysis of the style of the great essayist be wanted, it can be had in a chapter of Professor Minto's well known *Manual of English Prose Literature*.

CHRONOLOGY OF MILTON'S LIFE

WITH IMPORTANT CONTEMPORARY EVENTS

1608. Born in London December 9th.
1625. Entered Christ's College, Cambridge.
1625. [Charles I. became King.]
1632. Left college and took up his residence in Buckinghamshire.
- 1632-37. Poems *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Comus*, *Lycidas*, and *Arcades* written.
1637. Death of Milton's mother.
- 1638-9. Visit to Italy.
- 1641-2. Essays on Church Government written.
1642. [Great Civil War begun.]
1643. Marriage to Mary Powell.
- 1644-5. Tracts on Divorce published, also his *Areopagitica*, a *Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing*.
1647. Death of Milton's father.
1649. [Charles I. executed January 30th.]
- 1649-55. Execution defended by Milton in *The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates*, and in other pamphlets.
1649. Made Secretary of State March 15th.
1652. Failure of his eyesight and death of his first wife.
1653. [Cromwell made Lord Protector.]
1656. Marriage to Catherine Woodcock, who died in February, 1658.
1658. [Death of Oliver Cromwell.]
1659. [End of the Puritan Government.]
Retired from public life.
- 1659-60. Political pamphlets published.
1663. Marriage to Elizabeth Minshull.
1667. *Paradise Lost* published.
1671. *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* published.
1674. Died November 8th.

PREFATORY NOTE.

THE essay on Milton appeared in August, 1825, in the great Whig organ, *The Edinburgh Review*, and was nominally a review of Charles R. Sumner's translation of Milton's tract on *Christian Doctrine*. The *Edinburgh*, established in 1802, was at that time almost as old as the new contributor who was destined to out-shine its censorious editor Francis Jeffrey, and its witty co-founder Sydney Smith. Macaulay had previously furnished a few articles to *Knight's Quarterly*, but he was practically an unknown writer when he launched forth the political pamphlet — it was little more — that was to make him famous. Its effect was instantaneous. Social invitations of all sorts littered his table. Jeffrey wrote wondering where he "picked that style up," and the great preacher, Robert Hall, who was near his end, was discovered lying on his floor trying, by means of grammar and dictionary, to work out in the original Italian the parallel between Dante and Milton, — an incident all the more pathetic, as Arnold has remarked, from the fact that he could not have accomplished his purpose had he been in full health and master of the language. But the readers of 1825 were not very critical, and they swallowed the parallel and flattered Macaulay in a way that would be possible now only in the case of the author of the latest dialect story. Yet the public, after all, knew what it was about, and the qualities that made the essay famous seventy years ago keep it famous to-day. These qualities have nothing to do with criticism, for as criticism Macaulay's performance is crude in the extreme. He recognized this fact himself twenty years later, and condemned his own youthful extravagance of matter and style, but Matthew Arnold went further and practically denied that the brilliant rhetorician had the true qualities of a critic at all. However extravagant this claim may seem, it is more than half true at all times and is abundantly true of the essay on Milton, which as criticism is not merely crude and extravagant, but unsound. Its treatment of Milton's poetry, for example, is lacking in proportion, in subtlety of penetration, and

even in intellectual veracity. Macaulay's pen simply slipped from his control at times, as when he wrote the absurd sentence about Milton's conception of love uniting "all the voluptuousness of the Oriental harem" with "all the pure and quiet affection of an English fireside." Even the readers of 1825 must have rubbed their eyes at this statement.

But at no time has the essay on Milton been compelled to stand on its merits as criticism. It has had nothing to do but stand on its merits as a piece of special pleading. And where can one find a more enthusiastic and inspiring rhetorical appeal for a favorable verdict in behalf of a man on trial for his reputation? Milton was on trial in 1825, for Johnson's biased *Life* still retained an authority it had never deserved, and there were still people in England who prayed for the Royal Martyr. He is on trial still with those narrow-minded persons who cannot forgive that he was a Puritan. To all such people, Macaulay, through his so-called essay, makes a forensic address, which for its power of suspending the judgment and exciting the imagination has seldom been paralleled in the history of literature. Had Milton and Macaulay been contemporaries and had the former been on trial for his life, the latter could have delivered the essay as a speech to the jury, and then published it for literary purposes with hardly greater changes than Cicero made in his oration for Archias. It was, then, a rhetorical appeal that took captive the readers of two generations ago, and it is a rhetorical appeal that captivates us all, old and young, to-day.

Now it is a most excellent thing to be captivated by an appeal that is made in favor of John Milton. No other writer or character in English history will so well repay study unless it be Shakespeare, and him we can study only in his works. But for the perfection of artistic workmanship and for loftiness of purpose for political wisdom and for private virtue, Milton surpasses even Shakespeare himself, and so as a man and a writer is worthy of our eternal regard and reverent contemplation. The materials for the study of his life are full, and when they are mastered the petty fault-findings of captious critics seem to be of as little consequence as the spots on the sun are to the naked eye. The better this noble and heroic man is known, the more he will be loved and honored, and if Macaulay's essay arouse in any reader a desire to know him (as it surely should), then the day of its perusal will be a marked one in that reader's intelle-

tual life. And from the essay he can go on to the great *Life of Milton* by Professor Masson, and to the truly admirable biographies by Mark Pattison (in the *English Men of Letters*) and by Dr. Richard Garnett (in the *Great Writers*), until, at last, steeped in knowledge of his subject and glowing with enthusiasm, he becomes what every man should wish to be — a true Miltonian.

In following the interesting leads which this essay opens, the reader will do well to consult Macaulay's *History of England* and Green's *Short History of the English People*, Saintsbury's *History of Elizabethan Literature*, Edmund Gosse's *History of Eighteenth Century Literature*, Ward's *English Poets*, and Mahaffy's *History of Classical Greek Literature*.

MILTON.

TOWARDS the close of the year 1823, Mr. Lemon,¹ deputy keeper of the state papers, in the course of his researches among the presses of his office met with a large Latin manuscript. With it were found corrected copies of the foreign dispatches written by Milton while he filled the office of secretary,² and several papers relating to the Popish Trials and the Rye House Plot.³ The whole was wrapped up in an envelope, superscribed, "To Mr. Skinner, Merchant."⁴

¹ Robert Lemon (1800–1867) made other important discoveries, and did much to improve the methods of keeping public documents in England.

² Milton was made Latin secretary, or rather secretary for foreign tongues, in 1649, and held the office for ten years. He was not a mere copyist, but drafted state papers, and was employed to defend the Commonwealth against its critics. It was his labor over his reply to Salmasius (see page 64, note 2) that cost him his eyesight.

³ The Popish Trials followed the absurd charges of Titus Oates that there was a Roman Catholic plot to overthrow Protestantism and murder Charles II. (1678–79). The Rye House Plot was an actual conspiracy to murder Charles and his brother James, formed by some of the baser Whigs (1683).

⁴ This was Daniel Skinner, nephew of that Cyriac Skinner to whom Milton addressed his twenty-first and twenty-second sonnets. The year after Milton's death (1675) the younger Skinner tried to have the *Treatise on Christian Doctrine* and the foreign dispatches published in Holland, England not being a

On examination the large manuscript proved to be the long-lost essay on the Doctrines of Christianity, which, according to Wood and Toland,¹ Milton finished after the Restoration, and deposited with Cyriac Skinner. Skinner, it is well known, held the same political opinions with his illustrious friend. It is therefore probable, as Mr. Lemon conjectures, that he may have fallen under the suspicions of the government during that persecution of the Whigs which followed the dissolution of the Oxford Parliament;² and that, in consequence of a general seizure of his papers, this work may have been brought to the office in which it has been found. But whatever the adventures of the manuscript may have been, no doubt can exist that it is a genuine relic of the great poet.

Mr. Sumner,³ who was commanded by his Majesty to edit and translate the treatise, has acquitted himself of his task in a manner honorable to his talents and to his character. His version is not, indeed,

likely place then for such an undertaking. Owing to various complications, Daniel Elzevir, the printer, delivered the manuscripts to the English authorities, who pigeon-holed them.

¹ Anthony à Wood (1632-1695), the Oxford antiquarian, gave a sketch of Milton (who though a graduate of Cambridge was admitted to the M. A. of Oxford) in his *Athenæ Oxonienses*. John Toland (1670-1722), the well-known deistical writer, published a life of Milton in 1699.

² Parliament met at Oxford in March, 1681, in order that the Commons might not be influenced by the citizens of London. The bill for excluding James II. from the succession was then being pressed by the Whigs. The student should look up in some good dictionary the origin of the terms "Whig" and "Tory" (loosely speaking, Liberal and Conservative).

³ The favorite chaplain of George IV. (who paid the expenses of the edition), and afterwards Bishop of Winchester.

very easy or elegant; but it is entitled to the praise of clearness and fidelity. His notes abound with interesting quotations, and have the rare merit of really elucidating the text. The preface is evidently the work of a sensible and candid man, firm in his own religious opinions, and tolerant towards those of others.

The book itself will not add much to the fame of Milton. It is, like all his Latin works, well written though not exactly in the style of the prize essays of Oxford and Cambridge. There is no elaborate imitation of classical antiquity, no scrupulous purity of none of the ceremonial cleanness, which characterized the diction of our academical Pharisees.¹ The author does not attempt to polish and brighten his composition into the Ciceronian gloss and brilliancy. He does not, in short, sacrifice sense and spirit to pedantic refinements. The nature of his subject compelled him to use many words

“That would have made Quintilian stare and gasp.”²

But he writes with as much ease and freedom as if Latin were his mother tongue; and, where he is least happy, his failure seems to arise from the carelessness of a native, not from the ignorance of a foreigner. We may apply to him what Denham³ with great felicity

¹ Macaulay means to imply that modern scholars in writing Latin pay more attention, like the Pharisees, to the external graces of style than to inward soundness of matter.

² From Milton's eleventh sonnet. Marcus Fabius Quintilianus (circa 36-96 A. D.) was a famous Roman critic and teacher of rhetoric.

³ Sir John Denham (1615-1668) and Abraham Cowley (1618-1667), both noted poets once, and precursors of the formal school of Dryden and Pope. Some of Cowley's poems and his *Essays* ought to be read, as well as Macaulay's *Conversation between M*

city says of Cowley. He wears the garb, but not the clothes, of the ancients.

Throughout the volume are discernible the traces of a powerful and independent mind, emancipated from the influence of authority, and devoted to the search of truth. Milton professes to form his system from the Bible alone; and his digest of scriptural texts is certainly among the best that have appeared. But he is not always so happy in his inferences as in his citations.

Some of the heterodox doctrines which he avows seem to have excited considerable amazement, particularly his Arianism, and his theory on the subject of polygamy. Yet we can scarcely conceive that any person could have read the "Paradise Lost" without suspecting him of the former; nor do we think that any reader, acquainted with the history of his life, ought to be much startled at the latter. The opinions which he has expressed respecting the nature of the Deity, the eternity of matter, and the observation of the Sabbath, might, we think, have caused more just surprise.¹

But we will not go into the discussion of these points. The book, were it far more orthodox or far *Abraham Cowley and Mr. John Milton, touching the Great Civil War*. The lines referred to occur in Denham's *Elegy on Cowley*, and are as follows:—

"Horace's wit and Virgil's state
He did not steal, but emulate,
And when he would like them appear,
Their garb, but not their clothes, did wear."

¹ For a fuller description of Milton's treatise, see Garnett's *Milton*, pp. 191–193. Milton did not exactly share the notions of Arius as to the nature of Christ, but was rather a semi-Arian. He tolerated polygamy on the ground that the Bible did not expressly prohibit it.

more heretical than it is, would not much edify or corrupt the present generation. The men of our time are not to be converted or perverted by quartos. A few more days and this essay will follow the "*Defensio Populi*"¹ to the dust and silence of the upper shelf. The name of its author, and the remarkable circumstances attending its publication, will secure to it a certain degree of attention. For a month or two it will occupy a few minutes of chat in every drawing-room, and a few columns in every magazine; and it will then, to borrow the elegant language of the play-bills, be withdrawn to make room for the forthcoming novelties.

We wish, however, to avail ourselves of the interest, transient as it may be, which this work has excited. The dexterous Capuchins² never choose to preach on the life and miracles of a saint till they have awakened the devotional feelings of their auditors by exhibiting some relic of him, — a thread of his garment, a lock of his hair, or a drop of his blood. On the same principle, we intend to take advantage of the late interesting discovery, and, while this memorial of a great and good man is still in the hands of all, to say something of his moral and intellectual qualities. Nor, we are convinced, will the severest of our readers blame us if, on an occasion like the present, we turn for a short time from the topics of the day to commemorate, in all love and reverence, the genius and virtues of John Milton,

¹ The Latin treatise in defense of the people of England against the criticisms of Salmasius. See page 64, note 2.

² The Capuchins are a branch of the Franciscan monks, founded in 1528, and so named from the long pointed capouch or cowl they wear.

the poet, the ~~statesman~~, the philosopher, the glory of English literature, the champion and the martyr of English liberty. *Reputation*

It is by his poetry that Milton is best known, and it is of his poetry that we wish first to speak. By the general suffrage of the civilized world, his place has been assigned among the greatest masters of the art. His detractors, however, though outvoted, have not been silenced. There are many critics, and some of great name, who contrive in the same breath to extol the poems and to decry the poet. *to lessen reputation* *for* *clamor against* The works they acknowledge, considered in themselves, may be classed among the noblest productions of the human mind. But they will not allow the author to rank with those great men who, born in the infancy of civilization, supplied by their own powers the want of instruction; and, though destitute of models themselves, bequeathed to posterity models which defy imitation. *an* Milton, it is said, inherited what his predecessors created: he lived in an enlightened age; he received a finished education; and we must, therefore, if we would form a just estimate of his powers, make large deductions in consideration of these advantages. *an*

We venture to say, on the contrary, paradoxical as the remark may appear, that no poet has ever had to struggle with more unfavorable circumstances than Milton. He doubted, as he has himself owned, whether he had not been born "an age too late."¹ For this notion Johnson has thought fit to make him the butt of much clumsy ridicule.² The poet, we believe, understood the nature of his art better than

¹ See *Paradise Lost*, ix. 44.

² See Johnson's *Life of Milton*, near the middle. Macaulay's remark is hardly just to Johnson.

the critic. He knew that his poetical genius derived no advantage from the civilization which surrounded him, or from the learning which he had acquired; and he looked back with something like regret to the ruder age of simple words and vivid impressions.

We think that, as civilization advances, poetry almost necessarily declines. Therefore, though we fervently admire those great works of imagination which have appeared in dark ages, we do not admire them the more because they have appeared in dark ages. On the contrary, we hold that the most wonderful and splendid proof of genius is a great poem produced in a civilized age. We cannot understand why those who believe in that most *correct in opinion* orthodox article of literary faith, that the earliest poets are generally the best, should wonder at the rule as if it were the exception. *assurance* Surely, the uniformity of the phenomenon indicates a corresponding uniformity in the cause.¹

The fact is, that common observers reason from the progress of the experimental sciences to that of the imitative arts. The improvement of the former is gradual and slow. Ages are spent in collecting materials, ages more in separating and combining them. Even when a system has been formed, there is still something to add, to alter, or to reject. Every generation enjoys the use of a vast hoard bequeathed to it by antiquity, and transmits that hoard, *to give it* augmented by fresh acquisitions, to future ages. In these pursuits, therefore, the first speculators lie under great disadvantages, and, even when they fail, are

¹ Macaulay here and elsewhere in this essay is merely expanding ideas that he had previously expressed in his article on Dante. There is some truth in his views, but many of his statements must not be accepted unreservedly.

entitled to praise. Their pupils, with far inferior intellectual powers, speedily surpass them in actual attainments. Every girl who has read Mrs. Marcet's¹ little dialogues on political economy could teach Montague² or Walpole³ many lessons in finance. Any intelligent man may now, by resolutely applying himself for a few years to mathematics, learn more than the great Newton knew after half a century of study and meditation. *see note on page 110*

But it is not thus with music, with painting, or with sculpture. Still less is it thus with poetry. The progress of refinement rarely supplies these arts with better objects of imitation. It may indeed improve the instruments which are necessary to the mechanical operations of the musician, the sculptor, and the painter. But language, the machine of the poet, is best fitted for his purpose in its rudest state. Nations, like individuals, first perceive and then abstract. They advance from particular images to general terms. Hence, the vocabulary of an enlightened society is *rational, useful, & plain* philosophical; that of a half-civilized people is poetical.⁴

¹ Mrs. Jane Marcet (1769-1858) wrote a text-book for children, sufficiently described in the text. Political Economy was a favorite science in the early part of the century, and a more celebrated woman, Harriet Martineau, made it the basis for a series of tales.

² Charles Montague (1661-1715), afterwards Earl of Halifax, the famous chancellor of the exchequer under William III., and founder of the Bank of England. He was a patron of literary men (see the essay on Addison, page 110), and a small poet himself. He is frequently referred to in Macaulay's *History*.

³ The great Sir Robert Walpole (1676-1745), George II.'s chief minister.

⁴ Note the effect of the short sentences. The very rapidity of the argument helps to carry conviction.

This change in the language of men is partly the cause and partly the effect of a corresponding change in the nature of their intellectual operations, — of a change by which science gains and poetry loses. Generalization is ^{necessary} to the advancement of knowledge, but particularity is indispensable to the creations of the imagination. In proportion as men know more and think more, they look less at individuals and more at classes. They therefore make better theories and worse poems. They give us vague phrases instead of images, and personified qualities instead of men. They may be better able to analyze human nature than their ^{predecessors}. But analysis is not the business of the poet. His office is to portray, not to dissect. He may believe in a moral sense, like Shaftesbury;¹ he may refer all human actions to self-interest, like Helvetius;² or he may never think about the matter at all. His creed on such subjects will no more influence his poetry, properly so called, than the notions which a painter may have conceived respecting the lachrymal glands, or the circulation of the blood, will affect the tears of his Niobe³ or the blushes of his Aurora. If Shakespeare had written a book on the motives of human actions, it is by no means certain that it would have

¹ Anthony Ashley Cooper (1671–1713), third Earl of Shaftesbury, is distinguished among his famous kinsmen for his *Characteristics*, once a very popular book. He ranks high as a stylist, but as a moral philosopher suffers from the neglect that attends most of the deistic writers of the period.

² Claude Helvétius (1715–1771), a popular French philosopher.

³ For the famous story of Niobe, who ~~wept herself into stone when her children were slain by Apollo and Diana~~, see a classical dictionary. Consult the same for legends concerning Aurora, the goddess of the dawn.

been a good one. It is extremely improbable that it would have contained half so much able reasoning on the subject as is to be found in "The Fable of the Bees." But could Mandeville¹ have created an Iago?² Well as he knew how to resolve characters into their elements, would he have been able to combine those elements in such a manner as to make up a man, — a real, living, individual man?

Perhaps no person can be a poet, or can even enjoy poetry, without a certain unsoundness of mind, if anything which gives so much pleasure ought to be called unsoundness. By poetry we mean not all writing in verse, nor even all good writing in verse. Our definition excludes many metrical compositions which, on other grounds, deserve the highest praise. By poetry we mean the art of employing words in such a manner as to produce an illusion on the imagination, the art of doing by means of words what the painter does by means of colors. Thus the greatest of poets has described it, in lines universally admired for the vigor and felicity of their diction, and still more valuable on account of the just notion which they convey of the art in which he excelled: —

"As imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name."³

These are the fruits of the "fine frenzy" which he

¹ Bernard de Mandeville (1670–1733), a satirist whose chief work — partly prose, partly verse — is named in the text. Its purpose is to show that luxury of any sort helps the laboring classes. Browning has resurrected Mandeville in his *Parleyings*.

² See Shakespeare's *Othello*.

³ *Midsummer Night's Dream*, V. i. 14–17.

ascribes to the poet, — a fine frenzy, doubtless, but still a frenzy. Truth, indeed, is essential to poetry; but it is the truth of madness. The reasonings are just, but the ^{premises} premises are false. After the first suppositions have been made, everything ought to be consistent; but those first suppositions require a degree of ^{credulity} credulity which almost amounts to a partial and temporary derangement of the intellect. Hence, of all people, children are the most imaginative. They abandon themselves without reserve to every ^{deceptive} illusion. Every image which is strongly presented to their mental eye produces on them the effect of reality. No man, whatever his sensibility may be, is ever affected by Hamlet or Lear as a little girl is affected by the story of poor Red Riding Hood. She knows that it is all false, that wolves cannot speak, that there are no wolves in England. Yet in spite of her knowledge she believes; she weeps; she trembles; she dares not go into a dark room lest she should feel the teeth of the monster at her throat. Such is the despotism of the imagination over uncultivated minds.

In a rude state of society, men are children with a greater variety of ideas. It is therefore in such a state of society that we may expect to find the poetical temperament in its highest perfection. In an enlightened age there will be much intelligence, much science, much philosophy, abundance of just classification and subtle analysis, abundance of wit and eloquence, abundance of verses, and even of good ones; but little poetry. Men will judge and compare, but they will not create. They will talk about the old poets, and comment on them, and to a certain degree enjoy them. But they will scarcely be able to conceive the

effect which poetry produced on their ruder ancestors, — the agony, the ecstasy, the plenitude of belief. The Greek Rhapsodists,¹ according to Plato, could scarce recite Homer without falling into convulsions. The Mohawk hardly feels the scalping-knife while he shouts his death song. The power which the ancient ^{bards} of Wales and Germany exercised over their auditors seems to modern readers almost miraculous. Such feelings are very rare in a civilized community, and most rare among those who participate most in its improvements. They linger longest among the peasantry. ^{here}

Poetry produces an illusion on the eye of the mind, as a magic lantern produces an illusion on the eye of the body. And, as the magic lantern acts best in a dark room, poetry effects its purpose most completely in a dark age. As the light of knowledge breaks in upon its exhibitions, as the outlines of certainty become more and more definite, and the shades of probability more and more distinct, the hues and lineaments of the phantoms which the poet calls up grow fainter and fainter. We cannot unite the incompatible advantages of reality and deception, the clear discernment of truth, and the exquisite enjoyment of fiction.² ^{deception and reality}

He who, in an enlightened and literary society, aspires to be a great poet, must first become a little child. He must take to pieces the whole web of his mind. He must unlearn much of that knowledge

¹ The rhapsodists were professional reciters of poems. The special reference is to Plato's *Ion*, which should be read entire in Jowett's translation.

² This paragraph illustrates well Macaulay's power of presenting his readers with apt and elaborated illustrations.

which has perhaps constituted hitherto his chief title to superiority. His very talents will be a hindrance to him. His difficulties will be proportioned to his proficiency in the pursuits which are fashionable among his contemporaries; and that proficiency will in general be proportioned to the vigor and activity of his mind. And it is well if, after all his sacrifices and exertions, his works do not resemble a lisping man or a modern ruin. We have seen in our own time great talents, intense labor, and long meditation employed in this struggle against the spirit of the age, and employed, we will not say absolutely in vain, but with ^{uncertain} dubious success and feeble applause.¹

If these reasonings be just, no poet has ever triumphed over greater difficulties than Milton. He received a learned education; he was a profound and elegant classical scholar; he had studied all the mysteries of Rabbinical literature;² he was intimately acquainted with every language of modern Europe from which either pleasure or information was then to be derived. He was perhaps the only great poet of later times who has been distinguished by the excellence of his Latin verse. The genius of Petrarch³ was scarcely of the first order; and his poems in the ancient language, though much praised by those who have never read them, are wretched com-

¹ The allusion is probably to Wordsworth.

² The term "Rabbinical literature" applies to the body of writings explanatory of the Scriptures composed by learned rabbis since the Christian era.

³ For Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374), who is chiefly known for his Italian sonnets and his love for Laura, but who also wrote much Latin verse, and was a leader in the Revival of Learning, see Hallam's *Literature of Europe*. Macaulay had criticised Petrarch much too harshly in *Knight's Quarterly* in 1824.

positions. Cowley,¹ with all his admirable wit and ingenuity, had little imagination; nor indeed do we think his classical ^{expression & ideas} diction comparable to that of Milton. The authority of Johnson is against us on this point. But Johnson had studied the bad writers of the Middle Ages till he had become utterly insensible to the Augustan elegance,² and was as ill qualified to judge between two Latin styles as a habitual drunkard to set up for a wine-taster.

Versification in a dead language is an ^{poor} exotic, a far-fetched, costly, sickly imitation of that which elsewhere may be found in healthful and ^{voluntary} spontaneous perfection. The soils on which this rarity flourishes are in general as ill suited to the production of vigorous native poetry as the flower-pots of a hot-house to the growth of oaks. That the author of the "Paradise Lost" should have written the "Epistle to Manso"³ was truly wonderful. Never before were such marked originality and such exquisite mimicry found together. Indeed, in all the Latin poems of Milton, the artificial manner ^{absolutely necessary} indispensable to such works is admirably preserved, while, at the same time, his genius gives to them a peculiar charm, an

¹ Cowley (see page 6, note 3) wrote a good deal of Latin verse, including a long poem on plants.

² The age of the Emperor Augustus was marked by the flowering of Roman literary genius in Virgil, Horace, Ovid, Tibullus, etc., most of whom described the glories and upheld the measures of the reign. Hence any period similarly characterized is termed Augustan, — *e. g.*, the reigns of Queen Anne and of Louis XIV.

³ This was a graceful poem in Latin hexameters, addressed to the celebrated Marquis Manso (1561–1645), the patron of Tasso and Marini, by Milton, who had been kindly received at Naples by the old nobleman.

air of nobleness and freedom, which distinguishes them from all other writings of the same class. They remind us of the amusements of those angelic warriors who composed the cohort of Gabriel:—

“About him exercised heroic games
The unarmed youth of heaven ; but nigh at hand
Celestial armory, shields, helms, and spears,
Hung high, with diamond flaming and with gold.”¹

We cannot look upon the sportive exercises for which the genius of Milton ungirds itself, without catching a glimpse of the gorgeous and terrible panoply which it is accustomed to wear. The strength of his imagination triumphed over every obstacle. So intense and ardent was the fire of his mind that it not only was not suffocated beneath the weight of fuel, but penetrated the whole superincumbent mass with its own heat and radiance.

It is not our intention to attempt anything like a complete examination of the poetry of Milton. The public has long been agreed as to the merit of the most remarkable passages, the incomparable harmony of the numbers, and the excellence of that style which no rival has been able to equal and no parodist to degrade,² which displays in their highest perfection the idiomatic powers of the English tongue, and to which every ancient and every modern language has contributed something of grace, of energy, or of music.

¹ *Paradise Lost*, iv. 551-554.

² Milton has been parodied, for example, by Pope in *The Rape of the Lock*, by John Philips in *The Splendid Shilling*, and by Isaac Hawkins Brown in *A Pipe of Tobacco*. Perhaps the most absurd attempt to imitate him is William Mason's elegy on Pope, entitled *Musæus*, which was modeled on *Lycidas*. For English parody in general, see A. S. Martin's *On Parody*.

In the vast field of criticism on which we are entering, innumerable reapers have already put their sickles. Yet the harvest is so abundant that the negligent search of a straggling gleaner may be rewarded with a sheaf.

The most striking characteristic of the poetry of Milton is the extreme remoteness of the associations by means of which it acts on the reader. Its effect is produced, not so much by what it expresses, as by what it suggests; not so much by the ideas which it directly conveys, as by other ideas which are connected with them. He electrifies the mind through conductors.¹ The most unimaginative man must understand the Iliad. Homer gives him no choice, and requires from him no exertion, but takes the whole upon himself, and sets the images in so clear a light that it is impossible to be blind to them. (The works of Milton cannot be comprehended or enjoyed unless the mind of the reader coöperate with that of the writer. He does not paint a finished picture, or play for a mere passive listener. He sketches, and leaves others to fill up the outline. He strikes the keynote, and expects his hearer to make out the melody.

We often hear of the magical influence of poetry. The expression in general means nothing; but, applied to the writings of Milton, it is most appropriate. His poetry acts like an incantation. Its merit lies less in its obvious meaning than in its occult power. There would seem, at first sight, to be no more in his words than in other words. But they are words of enchantment. No sooner are they pronounced than the past is present and the distant near. New forms of beauty start at once into existence, and all the

¹ Note the felicitous application of the scientific terms.

burial-places of the memory give up their dead. Change the structure of the sentence, substitute one synonym for another, and the whole effect is destroyed. The spell loses its power; and he who should then hope to ^{charm solemnly} conjure with it would find himself as much mistaken as Cassim in the Arabian tale, when he stood crying, "Open Wheat," "Open Barley," to the door which obeyed no sound but "Open Sesame."¹ The miserable failure of Dryden² in his attempt to translate into his own diction some parts of the "Paradise Lost" is a remarkable instance of this. "*The State of Innocence*".

In support of these observations we may remark, that scarcely any passages in the poems of Milton are more generally known, or more frequently repeated, than those which are little more than muster-rolls of names.³ They are not always more appropriate or more melodious than other names. But they are charmed names. Every one of them is the first link in a long chain of associated ideas. Like the dwelling-place of our infancy revisited in manhood, like the song of our country heard in a strange land, they produce upon us an effect wholly independent of their ^{truth} intrinsic value. One transports us back to a remote ^{untold} period of history. Another places us among the

¹ See the story of Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, in the *Arabian Nights' Entertainments*.

² This refers to Dryden's opera, *The State of Innocence*, based on *Paradise Lost*, with Milton's permission, it is said. Critics are agreed that the performance was unworthy of a poet who was to succeed Milton on the throne of English poetry, and to write the famous lines on him. See Ward's *English Poets* for these lines, and Macaulay's essay on Dryden, as well as the first chapter of Dr. Richard Garnett's *The Age of Dryden*.

³ See, for example, *Paradise Lost*, i. 580-585.

novel scenes and manners of a distant region. A third ^{evokes} all the dear classical recollections of childhood, — the schoolroom, the dog-eared Virgil, the holiday, and the prize. A fourth brings before us the splendid phantoms of chivalrous romance, the trophied lists, the embroidered housings, the quaint devices, the haunted forests, the enchanted gardens, the achievements of enamored knights, and the smiles of rescued princesses. *to End here for this.*

In none of the works of Milton is his peculiar manner more happily displayed than in the "Allegro" and the "Penseroso." It is impossible to conceive that the mechanism of language can be brought to a more exquisite degree of perfection. These poems differ from others as ^{essence} attar of roses differs from ordinary rosewater, the close-packed essence from the thin, diluted mixture. They are, indeed, not so much poems as collections of hints, from each of which the reader is to make out a poem for himself. Every epithet is a text for a stanza.¹

The "Comus" and the "Samson Agonistes" are works which, though of very different merit, offer some marked points of resemblance. Both are lyric poems in the form of plays. There are, perhaps, no two kinds of composition so essentially dissimilar as the drama and the ^{lyric} ode. The business of the dramatist is to keep himself out of sight, and to let nothing appear but his characters. As soon as he attracts

¹ This bit of criticism is often quoted — generally as Macaulay first wrote it — with *canto* in place of *stanza*. The paragraph is on the whole a little extravagant, as most critics of Milton would agree that in *Lycidas* he brought the mechanism of language "to a more exquisite degree of perfection;" but it is impossible to find serious fault with praise of poems so admirable.

notice to his personal feelings, the illusion is broken. The effect is as unpleasant as that which is produced on the stage by the voice of a prompter or the entrance of a scene-shifter. Hence it was that the tragedies of Byron were his least successful performances. They resemble those pasteboard pictures invented by the friend of children, Mr. Newbery,¹ in which a single movable head goes round twenty different bodies, so that the same face looks out upon us, successively, from the uniform of a hussar, the furs of a judge, and the rags of a beggar. In all the characters, — patriots and tyrants, haters and lovers, — the frown and sneer of Harold² were discernible in an instant. But this species of egotism, though fatal to the drama, is the inspiration of the ode.³ It is the part of the lyric poet to abandon himself without reserve to his own devotions.

Between these hostile elements many great men have endeavored to effect an amalgamation, but never with complete success. The Greek drama, on the model of which the "Samson" was written, sprang from the ode. The dialogue was ingrafted on the chorus, and naturally partook of its character. The genius of the greatest of the Athenian dramatists co-operated with the circumstances under which tragedy made its first appearance. Æschylus was, head and heart, a lyric poet. In his time the Greeks had far

¹ John Newbery (1713-1767), a publisher of children's books in St. Paul's Churchyard. — Goldsmith was one of his writers, and paid him a tribute in *The Vicar of Wakefield*.

² The hero of Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.

³ Macaulay seems to use "ode" in this paragraph as synonymous with lyric poetry; it is really the greatest form in which the lyrical or subjective impulse of the poet expresses itself, e. g., the *Odes* of Pindar, Wordsworth's *Ode to Duty*.

more intercourse with the East than in the days of Homer; and they had not yet acquired that immense superiority in war, in science, and in the arts, which, in the following generation, led them to treat the Asiatics with contempt. From the narrative of Herodotus it should seem that they still looked up, with the ^{real admiration} veneration of disciples, to Egypt and Assyria. At this period, accordingly, it was natural that the literature of Greece should be tinctured with the Oriental style. And that style, we think, is discernible in the works of Pindar¹ and Æschylus. The latter often reminds us of the Hebrew writers. The Book of Job, indeed, in conduct and diction, bears a considerable resemblance to some of his dramas.² Considered as plays, his works are absurd; considered as choruses, they are above all praise. If, for instance, we examine the address of Clytemnestra to Agamemnon on his return,³ or the description of the seven Argive chiefs,⁴ by the principles of dramatic writing, we shall instantly condemn them as monstrous. But if we forget the characters, and think only of the poetry, we shall admit that it has never been surpassed in energy and magnificence. Sophocles made the Greek drama as dramatic as was consistent with its original form. His portraits of men have a sort of similarity; but it is the similarity, not of a painting, but of

¹ In connection with Pindar (522-443 B. C.) read Milton's eighth-sonnet, and see Mahaffy.

² Job practically is a drama, and is so treated by modern scholars. See Moulton's edition in his *Modern Reader's Bible*.

³ The reference is to Æschylus's greatest play, the Agamemnon.

⁴ See Æschylus's *Seven against Thebes*, in which Thebes is besieged by seven champions from Argos ("Argive").

low-relief
 a bas-relief.¹ It suggests a resemblance, but it does not produce an illusion. Euripides attempted to carry the reform further. But it was a task far beyond his powers, perhaps beyond any powers. Instead of correcting what was bad, he destroyed what was excellent. He substituted crutches for stilts, bad sermons for good odes.

Milton, it is well known, admired Euripides highly, — much more highly than, in our opinion, Euripides deserved. Indeed, the caresses which this partiality leads our countryman to bestow on “sad Electra’s² poet” sometimes remind us of the beautiful Queen of Fairyland kissing the long ears of Bottom.³ At all events, there can be no doubt that this veneration for the Athenian, whether just or not, was injurious to the “Samson Agonistes.” Had Milton taken Æschylus for his model, he would have given himself up to the lyric inspiration, and poured out profusely all the treasures of his mind, without bestowing a thought on those dramatic proprieties which the nature of the work rendered it impossible to preserve. In the attempt to reconcile things in their own nature inconsistent, he has failed, as every one else must have failed. We cannot identify ourselves with the characters, as in a good play. We cannot identify ourselves with the poet, as in a good ode. The conflicting ingredients, like an acid and an alkali mixed, neutralize each other. We are by

¹ Admirers of *Antigone* will not relish this statement, which is extravagant.

² See Milton’s eighth sonnet. Macaulay subsequently modified his views as to Euripides, a poet whom Robert Browning has done much to make more popular.

³ See *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, IV. i.

no means insensible to the merits of this celebrated piece, to the severe dignity of the style, the graceful and pathetic solemnity of the opening speech, or the wild and barbaric¹ melody which gives so striking an effect to the choral passages. But we think it, we confess, the least successful effort of the genius of Milton.

The "Comus" is framed on the model of the Italian masque,² as the "Samson" is framed on the model of the Greek tragedy. It is certainly the noblest performance of the kind which exists in any language. It is as far superior to the "Faithful Shepherdess" as the "Faithful Shepherdess" is to the "Aminta" or the "Aminta" to the "Pastor Fido."³ It was well for Milton that he had here no

¹ This is an eighteenth century touch, which, following after the scientific comparison, produces an odd effect. Macaulay does slight justice to the *Samson*.

² The Masque (or Mask) ~~was a hybrid dramatic performance originating in Italy at the end of the fifteenth century.~~ It combined features of the masquerade, the carnival pageant, and the drama, and was often a costly affair. Transplanted to England it ~~flourished chiefly under James I.,~~ when the feature of good verse was added to it by Ben Jonson and others. From a literary point of view Milton's masque is confessedly the greatest extant. See J. A. Symonds's *Shakespeare and his Predecessors*.

³ The three plays here mentioned are all of the pastoral kind, — *i. e.*, the chief personages are shepherds and shepherdesses far more artificial than natural. The *Faithful Shepherdess* is by John Fletcher (1579–1625), whose famous partner, Beaumont, had no share in what must always be regarded as one of the treasures of English literature. The *Aminta* is by Tasso (1544–1595), who is more famous for his *Jerusalem Delivered*; and the *Pastor Fido* (*Faithful Shepherd*) is by the little read Italian poet Guarini (1537–1612). It takes a careful perusal of the four pieces to enable a reader to appreciate the essential justice of Macaulay's criticism, though it may be remarked that the com-

Euripides to mislead him. He understood and loved the literature of modern Italy. But he did not feel for it the same veneration which he entertained for the remains of Athenian and Roman poetry, consecrated by so many lofty and endearing recollections. The faults, moreover, of his Italian predecessors were of a kind to which his mind had a deadly antipathy. He could stoop to a plain style, sometimes even to a bald style; but false brilliancy was his utter aversion. His Muse had no objection to a russet attire; but she turned with disgust from the finery of Guarini, as tawdry and as paltry as the rags of a chimney-sweeper on May Day.¹ Whatever ornaments she wears are of massive gold, not only dazzling to the sight, but capable of standing the severest test of the crucible.

Milton attended in the "Comus" to the distinction which he afterwards neglected in the "Samson." He made his masque what it ought to be, essentially lyrical, and dramatic only in semblance. He has not attempted a fruitless struggle against a defect inherent in the nature of that species of composition; and he has therefore succeeded, wherever success was not impossible. The speeches must be read as majestic soliloquies; and he who so reads them will be enraptured with their eloquence, their sublimity, and their music. The interruptions of the dialogue, however, plex plot of Guarini is better than the insipidity of Tasso, and that the latter and lyric part of *Comus*, which Macaulay especially praises, would probably not have been written without Fletcher's inspiration.

¹ "They differ from them as a May-Day procession of chimney-sweepers differs from the Field of the Cloth of Gold." (Macaulay on Petrarch.) The first of May was a holiday for the chimney-sweeps.

impose a constraint upon the writer, and break the illusion of the reader. The finest passages are those which are lyric in form as well as in spirit. "I should much commend," said the excellent Sir Henry Wotton¹ in a letter to Milton, "the tragical part, if the lyrical did not ravish me with a certain Dorique² delicacy in your songs and odes, whereunto, I must plainly confess to you, I have seen yet nothing parallel in our language." The criticism was just. It is when Milton escapes from the shackles of the dialogue, when he is discharged from the labor of uniting two incongruous styles, when he is at liberty to indulge his choral raptures without reserve, that he rises even above himself. Then, like his own Good Genius bursting from the earthly form and weeds³ of Thyrsis,⁴ he stands forth in celestial freedom and beauty; he seems to cry exultingly,—

"Now my task is smoothly done,
I can fly, or I can run,"⁵

to skim the earth, to soar above the clouds, to bathe in the elysian dew of the rainbow, and to inhale the balmy smells of nard and cassia, which the musky

¹ Sir Henry Wotton (1568-1639), the famous Provost of Eton, and a minor poet (see Ward's *English Poets*), wrote this letter to Milton before the appearance of the anonymous edition of *Comus* in 1637.

² The reference is to the Doric Greek of Sicily, in which the pastorals of Theocritus (third century B. C.), the father of this species of poetry, were written.

³ Weeds = garments.

⁴ Thyrsis (a favorite name for a shepherd in classical pastorals) was the shepherd whose form the Attendant Spirit took in *Comus*.

⁵ *Comus*, 1012, 1013.

wings of the zephyr scatter through the cedared alleys of the Hesperides.¹

There are several of the minor poems of Milton on which we would willingly make a few remarks. Still more willingly would we enter into a detailed examination of that admirable poem, the "Paradise Regained," which, strangely enough, is scarcely ever mentioned except as an instance of the blindness of the parental affection which men of letters bear towards the offspring of their intellects. That Milton was mistaken in preferring this work, excellent as it is, to the "Paradise Lost," we readily admit.² But we are sure that the superiority of the "Paradise Lost" to the "Paradise Regained" is not more decided than the superiority of the "Paradise Regained" to every poem which has since made its appearance. Our limits, however, prevent us from discussing the point at length. We hasten on to that extraordinary production which the general suffrage of critics has placed in the highest class of human compositions.³

The only poem of modern times which can be compared with the "Paradise Lost" is the "Divine Comedy." The subject of Milton, in some points, resembled that of Dante; but he has treated it in a widely different manner. We cannot, we think, better illustrate our opinion respecting our own great poet, than

¹ Macaulay is here turning part of the Epilogue of *Comus* into prose. In so doing he feels bound to avoid using Milton's rare but beautiful epithet "cedarn."

² It is doubtful whether Milton had this preference. See Masson's introduction to the poem in the Eversley edition.

³ Macaulay omits all reference to *Lycidas* and to the *Ode on the Nativity*. He must have appreciated them highly, but can hardly have felt the admiration for the former that is now felt by most critical lovers of poetry.

by contrasting him with the father of Tuscan literature. *and for 7 hours,*

The poetry of Milton differs from that of Dante as the hieroglyphics of Egypt differed from the picture-writing of Mexico.¹ The images which Dante employs speak for themselves; they stand simply for what they are. Those of Milton have a signification which is often discernible only to the initiated. Their value depends less on what they directly represent than on what they remotely suggest. However strange, however grotesque, may be the appearance which Dante undertakes to describe, he never shrinks from describing it. He gives us the shape, the color, the sound, the smell, the taste; he counts the numbers; he measures the size. His similes are the illustrations of a traveler. Unlike those of other poets, and especially of Milton, they are introduced in a plain, business-like manner; not for the sake of any beauty in the objects from which they are drawn, not for the sake of any ornament which they may impart to the poem, but simply in order to make the meaning of the writer as clear to the reader as it is to himself. The ruins of the precipice which led from the sixth to the seventh circle of hell were like those of the rock which fell into the Adige² on the south of Trent. The cataract of Phlegethon³ was like that of

¹ Macaulay means that Milton represents things symbolically, Dante directly, as though he were painting a picture of each object.

² The Adige is a large river traversing Northern Italy. Trent, the capital of the Italian Tyrol, is situated on its banks. See *Inferno*, xii. 5.

³ Phlegethon — the burning river — one of the streams of Hades.

Aqua Cheta at the monastery of St. Benedict.¹ The place where the heretics were confined in burning tombs resembled the vast cemetery of Arles.²

Now let us compare with the exact details of Dante the dim intimations of Milton. We will cite a few examples. The English poet has never thought of taking the measure of Satan. He gives us merely a vague idea of vast bulk. In one passage the fiend lies stretched out, huge in length, floating many a rood, equal in size to the earth-born enemies of Jove, or to the sea monster which the mariner mistakes for an island.³ When he addresses himself to battle against the guardian angels, he stands like Teneriffe or Atlas; his stature reaches the sky. Contrast with these descriptions the lines in which Dante has described the gigantic spectre of Nimrod:⁴ "His face seemed to me as long and as broad as the ball of St. Peter's at Rome, and his other limbs were in proportion; so that the bank, which concealed him from the waist downwards, nevertheless showed so much of him that three tall Germans would in vain have attempted to reach to his hair." We are sensible that

¹ Aqua Cheta is a river of Romagna. St. Benedict was the celebrated founder of the Benedictine monks (born 480 A. D.). See *Inferno*, xvi. 97.

² Arles is in France (Provence), near the mouth of the Rhone. See *Inferno*, ix. 112.

³ *Paradise Lost*, i. 194; iv. 985.

⁴ Nimrod. See Genesis x. 8-12. The mighty hunter who figures as the founder of the Assyrio-Babylonian Empire. The passage translated is from the *Inferno*, xxxi. 58-64. Dante does not say "ball," but "pine," referring to a pine cone of bronze, which was taken from Hadrian's Mole and set in front of the old St. Peter's, but is now in the Vatican garden. So also he says Frieslanders, not Germans, on account of the fact that the former were supposed to be tall.

we do no justice to the admirable style of the Florentine poet. But Mr. Cary's¹ translation is not at hand; and our version, however rude, is sufficient to illustrate our meaning.

Once more, compare the lazar house² in the eleventh book of the "Paradise Lost" with the last ward of Malebolge³ in Dante. Milton avoids the loathsome details, and takes refuge in indistinct but solemn and tremendous imagery: Despair hurrying from couch to couch to mock the wretches with his attendance; Death shaking his dart over them, but, in spite of supplications, delaying to strike. What says Dante? "There was such a moan there as there would be if all the sick who, between July and September, are in the hospitals of Valdichiana, and of the Tuscan swamps, and of Sardinia, were in one pit together; and such a stench was issuing forth as is wont to issue from decayed limbs."⁴

We will not take upon ourselves the invidious office of settling precedence between two such writers. Each in his own department is incomparable; and each, we may remark, has wisely, or fortunately, taken a subject adapted to exhibit his peculiar talent to the greatest advantage. "The Divine Comedy" is a personal narrative. Dante is the eye-witness and ear-witness of that which he relates. He is the very

¹ Henry Francis Cary (1772-1844), whose blank verse translation of Dante is still popular, although many poets, including Longfellow, have essayed the task in whole or in part.

² *Paradise Lost*, xi. 477 seq. *Lazar-house*, a hospital. (Cf. *Lazarus*.)

³ Malebolge, the name given to the eighth circle of Hell. It is about equivalent to "Horrible Place." *Inferno*, xviii. 1.

⁴ *Inferno*, xxix. 46-51. Valdichiana, a region in Tuscany now more salubrious than in Dante's time.

man who has heard the tormented spirits crying out for the second death;¹ who has read the dusky characters² on the portal within which there is no hope; who has hidden his face from the terrors of the Gorgon;³ who has fled from the hooks and the seething pitch of Barbariccia and Draghignazzo.⁴ His own hands have grasped the shaggy sides of Lucifer.⁵ His own feet have climbed the mountain of expiation.⁶ His own brow has been marked by the purifying angel.⁷ The reader would throw aside such a tale in incredulous disgust unless it were told with the strongest air of veracity; with a sobriety even in its horrors; with the greatest precision and multiplicity in its details. The narrative of Milton in this respect differs from that of Dante, as the adventures of Amadis differ from those of Gulliver.⁸ The author of "Amadis" would have made his book ridiculous if he had introduced those minute particulars which give such a charm to the work of Swift, — the nautical observations, the affected delicacy about names, the official documents transcribed at full length, and

¹ That is, for the death of the soul. *Inferno*, i. 117.

² The famous "Lasciate ogni Speranza, voi ch'entrate," "All hope abandon, ye who enter here." *Inferno*, iii. 9.

³ See *Inferno*, ix. 56.

⁴ The names of fiends. *Inferno*, xxi. 120, 121.

⁵ See the last canto of the *Inferno*.

⁶ That is, the Mount of Purgatory.

⁷ *Purgatorio*, ix. 112. The angel at the entrance of Purgatory marks Dante's forehead with seven P's (*peccata*) for the Seven Deadly Sins. The marks disappear as he mounts upward.

⁸ The hero of a once highly popular romance of chivalry, entitled *Amadis of Gaul*, a Spanish work of the fourteenth century, though perhaps first written in Portuguese by Vasco Lobeira (died 1403). A French origin has also been claimed. Southey's condensed translation may be consulted.

all the unmeaning gossip and scandal of the court, springing out of nothing, and tending to nothing. We are not shocked at being told that a man who lived, nobody knows when, saw many very strange sights, and we can easily abandon ourselves to the illusion of the romance. But when Lemuel Gulliver, surgeon, resident at Rotherhithe, tells us of pygmies and giants, flying islands, and philosophizing horses, nothing but such circumstantial touches could produce for a single moment a deception on the imagination.

Of all the poets who have introduced into their works the agency of supernatural beings, Milton has succeeded best. Here Dante decidedly yields to him; and, as this is a point on which many rash and ill-considered judgments have been pronounced, we feel inclined to dwell on it a little longer. The most fatal error which a poet can possibly commit in the management of his machinery is that of attempting to philosophize too much. Milton has been often censured for ascribing to spirits many functions of which spirits must be incapable. But these objections, though sanctioned by eminent names, originate, we venture to say, in profound ignorance of the art of poetry.

What is spirit? What are our own minds, the portion of spirit with which we are best acquainted? We observe certain phenomena. We cannot explain them into material causes. We therefore infer that there exists something which is not material. But of this something we have no idea. We can define it only by negatives. We can reason about it only by symbols. We use the word, but we have no image of the thing; and the business of poetry is with images, and not with words. The poet uses words in-

deed; but they are merely the instruments of his art, not its objects. They are the materials which he is to dispose in such a manner as to present a picture to the mental eye. And if they are not so disposed, they are no more entitled to be called poetry than a bale of canvas and a box of colors to be called a painting.

Logicians may reason about abstractions, but the great mass of men must have images. The strong tendency of the multitude in all ages and nations to idolatry can be explained on no other principle. The first inhabitants of Greece, there is reason to believe, worshiped one invisible Deity.¹ But the necessity of having something more definite to adore produced, in a few centuries, the innumerable crowd of gods and goddesses. In like manner the ancient Persians thought it impious to exhibit the Creator under a human form. Yet even these transferred to the sun the worship which, in speculation, they considered due only to the Supreme Mind. The history of the Jews is the record of a continued struggle between pure Theism, supported by the most terrible sanctions, and the strangely fascinating desire of having some visible and tangible object of adoration. Perhaps none of the secondary causes which Gibbon² has assigned for the rapidity with which Christianity spread over the world, while Judaism scarcely ever acquired a proselyte, operated more powerfully than this feeling. God, the uncreated, the incomprehensible, the invisible, attracted few worshipers. A philosopher might admire so noble a conception, but

¹ Modern scholars would not all agree with this statement.

² See the famous and much censured sixteenth chapter of the *Decline and Fall*.

the crowd turned away in disgust from words which presented no image to their minds. It was before Deity embodied in a human form, walking among men, partaking of their infirmities, leaning on their bosoms, weeping over their graves, slumbering in the manger, bleeding on the cross, that the prejudices of the Synagogue, and the doubts of the Academy, and the pride of the Portico, and the fasces of the Lictor, and the swords of thirty legions, were humbled in the dust.¹ Soon after Christianity had achieved its triumph, the principle which had assisted it began to corrupt it. It became a new paganism. Patron saints assumed the offices of household gods. St. George² took the place of Mars. St. Elmo³ consoled the mariner for the loss of Castor and Pollux. The Virgin Mother and Cecilia⁴ succeeded to Venus and the Muses. The fascination of sex and loveliness was again joined to that of celestial dignity, and the

¹ That is, the prejudices of Jews, Greek philosophers (Plato and Aristotle taught in the grove of *Academos*, and Zeno, founder of the Stoics, in the *Porch*), and Roman magistrates and soldiers yielded to the humane character of Christ. The *lictor* was the attendant of Roman executives, and carried the badge of authority, — the *fasces*, an axe in a bundle of rods.

² St. George of Cappadocia, who by a curious process became the patron saint of England.

³ St. Elmo, the patron saint of Italian sailors, gave his name to the electric light seen on the masts and yards of ships, which phenomenon had been once attributed to the Dioscuri, *i. e.*, Castor and Pollux.

⁴ St. Cecilia, the patron saint of church music. Martyred, according to the very doubtful legend, about 230 A. D. The story goes that she invented the organ, and so a yearly musical festival is held in England on her day (November 22). The lover of poetry will always associate her with Dryden's two noble odes.

homage of chivalry was blended with that of religion. Reformers have often made a stand against these feelings, but never with more than apparent and partial success. The men who demolished the images in cathedrals have not always been able to demolish those which were enshrined in their minds. It would not be difficult to show that in politics the same rule holds good. Doctrines, we are afraid, must generally be embodied before they can excite a strong public feeling. The multitude is more easily interested for the most unmeaning badge, or the most insignificant name, than for the most important principle.

From these considerations we infer that no poet, who should affect that metaphysical accuracy for the want of which Milton has been blamed, would escape a disgraceful failure. Still, however, there was another extreme which, though far less dangerous, was also to be avoided. The imaginations of men are in a great measure under the control of their opinions. The most exquisite art of poetical coloring can produce no illusion when it is employed to represent that which is at once perceived to be incongruous and absurd. Milton wrote in an age of philosophers and theologians. It was necessary, therefore, for him to abstain from giving such a shock to their understandings as might break the charm which it was his object to throw over their imaginations. This is the real explanation of the indistinctness and inconsistency with which he has often been reproached. Dr. Johnson acknowledges that it was absolutely necessary that the spirits should be clothed with material forms. "But," says he, "the poet should have secured the consistency of his system by keeping

immateriality out of sight, and seducing the reader to drop it from his thoughts.”¹ This is easily said; but what if Milton could not seduce his readers to drop immateriality from their thoughts? What if the contrary opinion had taken so full a possession of the minds of men as to leave no room even for the half belief which poetry requires? Such we suspect to have been the case. It was impossible for the poet to adopt altogether the material or the immaterial system. He therefore took his stand on the debatable ground. He left the whole in ambiguity. He has doubtless, by so doing, laid himself open to the charge of inconsistency. But, though philosophically in the wrong, we cannot but believe that he was poetically in the right. This task, which almost any other writer would have found impracticable, was easy to him. The peculiar art which he possessed of communicating his meaning circuitously through a long succession of associated ideas, and of intimating more than he expressed, enabled him to disguise those incongruities which he could not avoid.

Poetry which relates to the beings of another world ought to be at once mysterious and picturesque. That of Milton is so. That of Dante is picturesque, indeed, beyond any that ever was written. Its effect approaches to that produced by the pencil or the chisel. But it is picturesque to the exclusion of all mystery. This is a fault on the right side, a fault inseparable from the plan of Dante's poem, which, as we have already observed, rendered the utmost accuracy of description necessary. Still it is a fault. The supernatural agents excite an interest, but it is not the interest which is proper to supernatural

¹ From the *Life of Milton*, toward the close.

agents. We feel that we could talk to the ghosts and demons without any emotion of unearthly awe. We could, like Don Juan, ask them to supper, and eat heartily in their company.¹ Dante's angels are good men with wings. His devils are spiteful, ugly executioners. His dead men are merely living men in strange situations. The scene which passes between the poet and Farinata is justly celebrated. Still, Farinata in the burning tomb is exactly what Farinata would have been at an *auto da fé*.² Nothing can be more touching than the first interview of Dante and Beatrice.³ Yet what is it but a lovely woman chiding, with sweet, austere composure, the lover for whose affection she is grateful, but whose vices she reprobates? The feelings which give the passage its charm would suit the streets of Florence as well as the summit of the Mount of Purgatory.

The spirits of Milton are unlike those of almost all other writers. His fiends, in particular, are wonderful creations. They are not metaphysical abstractions. They are not wicked men. They are not ugly beasts. They have no horns, no tails, none of the fee-faw-fum of Tasso and Klopstock.⁴ They have just enough in common with human nature to be intelligible to human beings. Their characters are, like their forms, marked by a certain dim resemblance to those of men, but exaggerated to gigantic dimensions, and veiled in mysterious gloom.

¹ Refers to a scene in Mozart's opera of this name.

² *Inferno*, x. 32.

³ Beatrice Portinari, Dante's early love, who meets him in Purgatory and guides him through Paradise.

⁴ Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock (1724-1803), author of the *Messias*, who is generally, but with much exaggeration, called the German Milton.

Perhaps the gods and dæmons¹ of Æschylus may best bear a comparison with the angels and devils of Milton. The style of the Athenian had, as we have remarked, something of the Oriental character; and the same peculiarity may be traced in his mythology. It has nothing of the amenity and elegance which we generally find in the superstitions of Greece. All is rugged, barbaric, and colossal. The legends of Æschylus seem to harmonize less with the fragrant groves and graceful porticos, in which his countrymen paid their vows to the God of Light and Goddess of Desire, than with those huge and grotesque labyrinths of eternal granite in which Egypt enshrined her mystic Osiris, or in which Hindostan still bows down to her seven-headed idols. His favorite gods are those of the elder generation, the sons of heaven and earth, compared with whom Jupiter himself was a stripling and an upstart, — the gigantic Titans and the inexorable Furies. Foremost among his creations of this class stands Prometheus, half fiend, half redeemer, the friend of man, the sullen and implacable enemy of Heaven. Prometheus bears undoubtedly a considerable resemblance to the Satan of Milton. In both we find the same impatience of control, the same ferocity, the same unconquerable pride. In both characters, also, are mingled, though in very different proportions, some kind and generous feelings. Prometheus, however, is hardly superhuman enough. He talks too much of his chains and his uneasy posture; he is rather too much depressed and agitated. His resolution seems to depend on the knowledge which he possesses that he holds the fate of his tor-

¹ A Greek word for "spirit," not to be confused with "demons" used in a bad sense. Prometheus was a dæmon.

turer in his hands, and that the hour of his release will surely come. But Satan is a creature of another sphere. The might of his intellectual nature is victorious over the extremity of pain. Amidst agonies which cannot be conceived without horror, he deliberates, resolves, and even exults. Against the sword of Michael, against the thunder of Jehovah, against the flaming lake and the marl burning with solid fire, against the prospect of an eternity of unintermitted misery, his spirit bears up unbroken, resting on its own innate energies, requiring no support from anything external, nor even from hope itself.¹

To return for a moment to the parallel which we have been attempting to draw between Milton and Dante, we would add that the poetry of these great men has in a considerable degree taken its character from their moral qualities. They are not egotists. They rarely obtrude their idiosyncrasies on their readers. They have nothing in common with those modern beggars for fame who extort a pittance from the compassion of the inexperienced by exposing the nakedness and sores of their minds. Yet it would be difficult to name two writers whose works have been more completely, though undesignedly, colored by their personal feelings.

The character of Milton was peculiarly distinguished by loftiness of spirit, that of Dante by intensity of feeling. In every line of the "Divine Comedy" we discern the asperity which is produced by pride struggling with misery. There is perhaps no work in the world so deeply and uniformly sorrowful. The melancholy of Dante was no fantastic caprice. It was not, as far as at this distance of time

¹ See *Paradise Lost*, vi.

sages directly egotistical. But the qualities which we have ascribed to Milton, though perhaps most strongly marked in those parts of his works which treat of his personal feelings, are distinguishable in every page, and impart to all his writings, prose and poetry, English, Latin, and Italian, a strong family likeness.

His public conduct was such as was to be expected from a man of a spirit so high and of an intellect so powerful. He lived at one of the most memorable eras in the history of mankind, — at the very crisis of the great conflict between Oromasdes and Arimanes,¹ liberty and despotism, reason and prejudice. That great battle was fought for no single generation, for no single land. The destinies of the human race were staked on the same cast with the freedom of the English people. Then were first proclaimed those mighty principles which have since worked their way into the depths of the American forests, which have roused Greece from the slavery and degradation of two thousand years, and which, from one end of Europe to the other, have kindled an unquenchable fire in the hearts of the oppressed, and loosed the knees of the oppressors with an unwonted fear.

Of those principles, then struggling for their infant existence, Milton was the most devoted and eloquent literary champion. We need not say how much we

¹ Persian deities representing the principles of good and evil, light and darkness, respectively. Macaulay's partisanship here is too obvious to need comment, but it should be noted that the recent founding of the South American republics that had cast off the yoke of Spain, the contemporary struggle of Greece against Turkey, and the repressive measures of the Holy Alliance naturally gave a militant tone to his intense Whig prejudices.

admire his public conduct. But we cannot disguise from ourselves that a large portion of his countrymen still think it unjustifiable. The Civil War, indeed, has been more discussed, and is less understood, than any event in English history. The friends of liberty labored under the disadvantage of which the lion in the fable complained so bitterly.¹ Though they were the conquerors, their enemies were the painters. As a body, the Roundheads had done their utmost to decry and ruin literature; and literature was even with them, as, in the long run, it always is with its enemies. The best book on their side of the question is the charming narrative of Mrs. Hutchinson. May's "History of the Parliament" is good, but it breaks off at the most interesting crisis of the struggle. The performance of Ludlow is foolish and violent; and most of the later writers who have espoused the same cause — Oldmixon, for instance, and Catherine Macaulay — have, to say the least, been more distinguished by zeal than either by candor or by skill.²

¹ See *Spectator* No. 11.

² The writers here enumerated on the popular side of the great controversy between the Parliament and the King are sufficiently characterized by Macaulay, and little more information need be given about them. Mrs. Lucy Hutchinson (1620–1659) was a very scholarly woman who wrote a life of her husband, Col. John Hutchinson, a parliamentary soldier and a fine character. The book was first printed in 1806. Thomas May (1594–1650) was a well educated man who, besides his history (which went down to 1643), wrote several plays. The memoirs of General Edmund Ludlow (1620–1693) are considered valuable by some critics. John Oldmixon (1673–1742) was a Whig pamphleteer, satirized by Pope, who wrote a *Critical History of England*. Finally Mrs. Catherine Macaulay (1733–1791) was a violent republican who wrote an eight-volume history beginning at the reign of James I.

On the other side are the most authoritative and the most popular historical works in our language, — that of Clarendon and that of Hume. The former is not only ably written and full of valuable information, but has also an air of dignity and sincerity which makes even the prejudices and errors with which it abounds respectable. Hume, from whose fascinating narrative the great mass of the reading public are still contented to take their opinions, hated religion so much that he hated liberty for having been allied with religion, and has pleaded the cause of tyranny with the dexterity of an advocate, while affecting the impartiality of a judge.

The public conduct of Milton must be approved or condemned, according as the resistance of the people to Charles I. shall appear to be justifiable or criminal. We shall therefore make no apology for dedicating a few pages to the discussion of that interesting and most important question. We shall not argue it on general grounds. We shall not recur to those primary principles from which the claim of any government to the obedience of its subjects is to be deduced. We are entitled to that vantage-ground, but we will relinquish it. We are, on this point, so confident of superiority that we are not unwilling to imitate the ostentatious generosity of those ancient knights who vowed to joust without helmet or shield against all enemies, and to give their antagonists the advantage of sun and wind. We will take the naked constitutional question. We confidently affirm that every reason which can be urged in favor of the Revolution of 1688 may be urged with at least equal force in favor of what is called the Great Rebellion.

In one respect only, we think, can the warmest

admirers of Charles venture to say that he was a better sovereign than his son. He was not, in name and profession, a Papist; we say in name and profession, because both Charles himself and his creature Laud,¹ while they abjured the innocent badges of Popery, retained all its worst vices, — a complete subjection of reason to authority, a weak preference of form to substance, a childish passion for mummeries, an idolatrous veneration for the priestly character, and, above all, a merciless intolerance. This, however, we waive. We will concede that Charles was a good Protestant, but we say that his Protestantism does not make the slightest distinction between his case and that of James.

The principles of the Revolution have often been grossly misrepresented, and never more than in the course of the present year. There is a certain class of men who, while they profess to hold in reverence the great names and great actions of former times, never look at them for any other purpose than in order to find in them some excuse for existing abuses.² In every venerable precedent they pass by what is essential and take only what is accidental; they keep out of sight what is beneficial, and hold up to public imitation all that is defective. If, in any part of any great example, there be anything unsound, these flesh flies detect it with an unerring instinct, and dart upon

¹ William Laud (1573–1645), Archbishop of Canterbury, and one of the chief advisers of Charles I. against the popular party who finally caused his execution, was so obnoxious to Macaulay that it will not do to accept unreservedly anything that the historian says of him.

² Macaulay here refers to the opponents of the measures proposed for the relief of Roman Catholics from political disabilities, a consummation obtained in 1829.

it with a ravenous delight. If some good end has been attained in spite of them, they feel, with their prototype, that their

“Labor must be to pervert that end,
And out of good still to find means of evil.”¹

To the blessings which England has derived from the Revolution these people are utterly insensible. The expulsion of a tyrant, the solemn recognition of popular rights, — liberty, security, toleration, — all go for nothing with them. One sect² there was which, from unfortunate temporary causes, it was thought necessary to keep under close restraint. One part of the empire³ there was so unhappily circumstanced that at that time its misery was necessary to our happiness, and its slavery to our freedom. These are the parts of the Revolution which the politicians of whom we speak love to contemplate, and which seem to them, not indeed to vindicate, but in some degree to palliate, the good which it has produced. Talk to them of Naples, of Spain, or of South America: they stand forth zealots for the doctrine of Divine Right,⁴ which has now come back to us, like a thief from transportation,⁵ under the *alias* of Legi-

¹ *Paradise Lost*, i. 164, 165.

² Roman Catholics.

³ Ireland.

⁴ The gist of the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings, which was held by High Churchmen and Tories throughout the Stuart period, is that the king is the father of his people and holds his authority from God, not, as nearly all nations now believe, from the consent of the governed. Hence resistance to the king was more than a crime against the state, — it was a crime against God.

⁵ The practice of transporting convicts to Australia did not cease till 1852.

timacy. But mention the miseries of Ireland. Then William¹ is a hero. Then Somers and Shrewsbury² are great men. Then the Revolution is a glorious era! The very same persons who, in this country, never omit an opportunity of reviving every wretched Jacobite³ slander respecting the Whigs of that period, have no sooner crossed St. George's Channel than they begin to fill their bumpers to the glorious and immortal memory.⁴ They may truly boast that they look not at men, but at measures. So that evil be done, they care not who does it; the arbitrary Charles or the liberal William, Ferdinand the Catholic or Frederick the Protestant.⁵ On such occasions their deadliest opponents may reckon upon their candid construction. The bold assertions of these people have of late impressed a large portion of the public with an opinion that James II. was expelled simply because he was a Catholic, and that the Revolution was essentially a Protestant revolution.

But this certainly was not the case, nor can any person who has acquired more knowledge of the history of those times than is to be found in Goldsmith's

¹ William III. — certainly Macaulay's hero in the *History*.

² John, Lord Somers (1652–1716), and Charles Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury (1660–1718), took leading parts in the Revolution of 1688 and were Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State respectively under William. Somers ranks high as a publicist and is a favorite of Macaulay's.

³ The Jacobites were the adherents of James II. (Latin *Jacobus*).

⁴ Of William III. — the regular Whig toast.

⁵ Charles I. and William III., oppressors of England and Ireland respectively, and the reigning sovereigns of Spain and Prussia, oppressors of their peoples in 1825, alike appeal, so Macaulay thinks and avers, to his own political opponents.

“Abridgment” believe that, if James had held his own religious opinions without wishing to make proselytes, or if, wishing even to make proselytes, he had contented himself with exerting only his constitutional influence for that purpose, the Prince of Orange would ever have been invited over. Our ancestors, we suppose, knew their own meaning; and, if we may believe them, their hostility was primarily, not to Popery, but to tyranny. They did not drive out a tyrant because he was a Catholic, but they excluded Catholics from the Crown because they thought them likely to be tyrants. The ground on which they, in their famous resolution,¹ declared the throne vacant, was this: “that James had broken the fundamental laws of the kingdom.” Every man, therefore, who approves of the Revolution of 1688 must hold that the breach of fundamental laws on the part of the sovereign justifies resistance. The question, then, is this: Had Charles I. broken the fundamental laws of England?

No person can answer in the negative unless he refuses credit, not merely to all the accusations brought against Charles by his opponents, but to the narratives of the warmest Royalists, and to the confessions of the king himself. If there be any truth in any historian of any party who has related the events of that reign, the conduct of Charles, from his accession to the meeting of the Long Parliament,² had been a continued course of oppression and treachery. Let those who applaud the Revolution and condemn the Rebellion mention one act of James II. to which

¹ Resolution of Parliament in 1689.

² It continued from 1640 to 1660, with an intermission under Cromwell.

a parallel is not to be found in the history of his father. Let them lay their fingers on a single article in the Declaration of Right, presented by the two houses to William and Mary, which Charles is not acknowledged to have violated. He had, according to the testimony of his own friends, ^{enjoyed} usurped the functions of the legislature, raised taxes without the consent of Parliament, and quartered troops on the people in the most illegal and vexatious manner. Not a single session of Parliament had passed without some unconstitutional attack on the freedom of debate. The right of petition was grossly violated. Arbitrary judgments, exorbitant fines, and unwarranted imprisonments were grievances of daily occurrence. If these things do not justify resistance, the Revolution was treason; if they do, the great Rebellion was laudable. *commendable*

But, it is said, why not adopt milder measures? Why, after the king had consented to so many reforms and renounced so many oppressive ^{prerogatives} ~~prerogatives~~, did the Parliament continue to rise in their demands at the risk of provoking a civil war? The ship money¹ had been given up, the Star Chamber² had been abolished, provision had been made for the frequent convocation and secure deliberation of Parliaments. Why not pursue an end confessedly good by peaceable and regular means? We recur again to the analogy of the Revolution. Why was James driven from the throne? Why was he not retained

¹ *Ship money* refers to the illegal endeavor of Charles I. to raise money by enforcing old and obsolete precedents with regard to the furnishing of ships by the seaport towns.

² For this peculiar, extra-constitutional court, used by the king and his ministers as an instrument of tyranny, see Green.

upon conditions? He, too, had offered to call a free Parliament, and to submit to its decision all the matters in dispute. Yet we are in the habit of praising our forefathers, who preferred a revolution, a disputed succession, a dynasty of strangers, twenty years of foreign and intestine war, a standing army, and a national debt, to the rule, however restricted, of a tried and proved tyrant.¹ The Long Parliament acted on the same principle, and is entitled to the same praise. They could not trust the king. He had, no doubt, passed salutary laws; but what assurance was there that he would not break them? He had renounced oppressive prerogatives, but where was the security that he would not resume them? The nation had to deal with a man whom no tie could bind; a man who made and broke promises with equal facility; a man whose honor had been a hundred times pawned and never redeemed.

Here, indeed, the Long Parliament stands on still stronger ground than the Convention of 1688. No action of James can be compared to the conduct of Charles with respect to the Petition of Right.² The Lords and Commons present him with a bill in which the constitutional limits of his power are marked out. He hesitates; he evades; at last he bargains to give

¹ Macaulay is here epitomizing the history of England during the generation after the Revolution. He refers to the claims of the exiled Stuarts, to the preference of the early Hanoverians for Germany, to the wars with Louis XIV., and in Ireland and Scotland to the permanent army which William's foreign policy necessitated, and to the issuing of bonds to meet the expenses of his government.

² Presented to Charles I. in 1628, petitioning against taxation without consent of Parliament, unlawful imprisonments, quartering of troops, etc.; a most important document.

his assent for five subsidies. The bill receives his solemn assent; the subsidies are voted; but no sooner is the tyrant relieved than he returns at once to all the arbitrary measures which he had bound himself to abandon, and violates all the clauses of the very act which he had been paid to pass.

For more than ten years the people had seen the rights which were theirs by a double claim — by immemorial inheritance and by recent purchase — infringed by the perfidious king who had recognized them. At length circumstances compelled Charles to summon another Parliament.¹ Another chance was given to our fathers; were they to throw it away as they had thrown away the former? Were they again to be cozened by *le Roi le veut*?² Were they again to advance their money on pledges which had been forfeited over and over again? Were they to lay a second Petition of Right at the foot of the throne, to grant another lavish aid in exchange for another unmeaning ceremony, and then to take their departure, till, after ten years more of fraud and oppression, their prince should again require a supply, and again repay it with a perjury? They were compelled to choose whether they would trust a tyrant or conquer him. We think that they chose wisely and nobly.

The advocates of Charles, like the advocates of other malefactors against whom overwhelming evi-

¹ The troubles in England and Ireland, and more especially in Scotland, put an end to the period of personal government (1629–1640) and led to the calling of the Long Parliament.

² "The King wills it" — the formula of royal consent to an Act of Parliament, dating from Anglo-Norman times. The corresponding negative is no longer used, as the veto power has lapsed.

dence is produced, generally decline all controversy about the facts, and content themselves with calling testimony to character. He had so many private virtues! And had James II. no private virtues? Was Oliver Cromwell, his bitterest enemies themselves being judges, destitute of private virtues? And what, after all, are the virtues ascribed to Charles? A religious zeal, not more sincere than that of his son, and fully as weak and narrow-minded, and a few of the ordinary household decencies which half the tombstones in England claim for those who lie beneath them. A good father! A good husband! Ample apologies indeed for fifteen years of persecution, tyranny, and falsehood!

We charge him with having broken his coronation oath, and we are told that he kept his marriage vow! We accuse him of having given up his people to the merciless inflictions of the most hot-headed and hard-hearted of prelates,¹ and the defense is that he took his little son on his knee and kissed him! We censure him for having violated the articles of the Petition of Right, after having, for good and valuable consideration, promised to observe them; and we are informed that he was accustomed to hear prayers at six o'clock in the morning! It is to such considerations as these, together with his Vandyke² dress, his handsome face, and his peaked beard, that he owes, we verily believe, most of his popularity with the present generation.

For ourselves, we own that we do not understand the common phrase, "a good man, but a bad king."

¹ Laud.

² Referring to the many pictures made of Charles by the famous Flemish painter, Sir Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641).

We can as easily conceive a good man and an unnatural father, or a good man and a treacherous friend. We cannot, in estimating the character of an individual, leave out of our consideration his conduct in the most important of all human relations; and if in that relation we find him to have been selfish, cruel, and deceitful, we shall take the liberty to call him a bad man, in spite of all his temperance at table and all his regularity at chapel.¹

We cannot refrain from adding a few words respecting a topic on which the defenders of Charles are fond of dwelling. If, they say, he governed his people ill, he at least governed them after the example of his predecessors. If he violated their privileges, it was because those privileges had not been accurately defined. No act of oppression has ever been imputed to him which has not a parallel in the annals of the Tudors. This point Hume has labored,² with an art which is as discreditable in a historical work as it would be admirable in a *forensic* address. The answer is short, clear, and decisive. Charles had assented to the Petition of Right. He had renounced the oppressive powers said to have been exercised by his predecessors, and he had renounced them for money. He was not entitled to set up his antiquated claims against his own recent release.

These arguments are so obvious that it may seem superfluous to dwell upon them, but those who have

¹ Macaulay undoubtedly minimizes the amount of allowance to be made for Charles in consideration of his inherited ideas as to the divine origin of his power and of the teachings of his blind and selfish courtiers. He feels that this charge may be made against him, so he meets it in the next paragraph with an argument which simply opens up the same old discussion.

² That is, elaborated.

observed how much the events of that time are misrepresented and misunderstood will not blame us for stating the case simply. It is a case of which the simplest statement is the strongest.

The enemies of the Parliament, indeed, rarely choose to take issue on the great points of the question. They content themselves with exposing some of the crimes and follies to which public commotions necessarily give birth. They bewail the unmerited fate of ~~Charles~~ ^{Earl} Strafford.¹ They execrate the lawless violence of the army. They laugh at the scriptural names of the preachers. Major-generals fleecing their districts; soldiers reveling on the spoils of a ruined peasantry; upstarts, enriched by the public plunder, taking possession of the hospitable firesides and hereditary trees of the old gentry; boys smashing the beautiful windows of cathedrals; Quakers² riding naked through the market-place; Fifth-monarchy men³ shouting for King Jesus; agitators lecturing from the tops of tubs on the fate of Agag, — all these, they tell us, were the offspring of the Great Rebellion.

Be it so. We are not careful to answer in this matter. These charges, were they infinitely more important, would not alter our opinion of an event which alone has made us to differ from the slaves who crouch beneath despotic sceptres. Many evils, no doubt, were produced by the Civil War. They

¹ Thomas Wentworth, Earl of Strafford (1593–1641), the able but misleading adviser of Charles I., who was executed under act of attainder. Browning has written a tragedy about him.

² George Fox began his work shortly before Charles's execution, but the sect was not organized till after the Restoration.

³ They believed that they must bring about by force the immediate kingdom of Christ, which would thus succeed the rule of Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome.

were the price of our liberty. Has the acquisition been worth the sacrifice? It is the nature of the devil of tyranny to tear and rend the body which he leaves.¹ Are the miseries of continued possession less horrible than the struggles of the tremendous exorcism?

If it were possible that a people brought up under an intolerant and arbitrary system could subvert that system without acts of cruelty and folly, half the objections to despotic power would be removed. We should, in that case, be compelled to acknowledge that it at least produces no pernicious effects on the intellectual and moral character of a nation. We deplore the outrages which accompany revolutions. But the more violent the outrages, the more assured we feel that a revolution was necessary. The violence of those outrages will always be proportioned to the ferocity and ignorance of the people, and the ferocity and ignorance of the people will be proportioned to the oppression and degradation under which they have been accustomed to live. Thus it was in our Civil War. The heads of the Church and State reaped only that which they had sown. The government had prohibited free discussion; it had done its best to keep the people unacquainted with their duties and their rights. The retribution was just and natural. If our rulers suffered from popular ignorance, it was because they had themselves taken away the key of knowledge. If they were assailed with blind fury, it was because they had exacted an equally blind submission.

It is the character of such revolutions that we always see the worst of them at first. Till men have

¹ Macaulay in his *Conversation between Milton and Cowley* had made Milton use this very same Biblical figure.

been some time free, they know not how to use their freedom. The natives of wine countries are generally sober. In climates where wine is a rarity intemperance abounds. A newly liberated people may be compared to a northern army encamped on the Rhine or the Xeres.¹ *city in Spain* It is said that, when soldiers in such a situation first find themselves able to indulge without restraint in such a rare and expensive luxury, nothing is to be seen but intoxication. Soon, however, plenty teaches discretion, and, after wine has been for a few months their daily fare, they become more temperate than they had ever been in their own country. In the same manner, the final and permanent fruits of liberty are wisdom, moderation, and mercy. Its immediate effects are often atrocious crimes, conflicting errors, skepticism on points the most clear, *dogmatism on points the most mysterious*.² It is just at this crisis that its enemies love to exhibit it. They pull down the scaffolding from the half-finished edifice; they point to the flying dust, the falling bricks, the comfortless rooms, the frightful irregularity of the whole appearance, and then ask in scorn where the promised splendor and comfort is to be found. If such miserable *sophisms* were to prevail, there would never be a good house or a good government in the world.

Ariosto tells a pretty story³ of a fairy, who, by some mysterious law of her nature, was condemned to appear at certain seasons in the form of a foul and poisonous snake. Those who injured her during the

¹ Xeres. Not a river, but the Spanish town Jerez de la Frontera, near Cadiz. Sherry gets its name from the place.

² Notice the balancing.

³ *Orlando Furioso*, xliii. 72.

period of her disguise were forever excluded from participation in the blessings which she bestowed. But to those who, in spite of her loathsome aspect, pitied and protected her, she afterwards revealed herself in the beautiful and celestial form which was natural to her; accompanied their steps, granted all their wishes, filled their houses with wealth, made them happy in love and victorious in war. Such a spirit is Liberty. At times she takes the form of a hateful reptile. She grovels, she hisses, she stings. But woe to those who in disgust shall venture to crush her! And happy are those who, having dared to receive her in her degraded and frightful shape, shall at length be rewarded by her in the time of her beauty and her glory!

There is only one cure for the evils which newly acquired freedom produces, and that cure is freedom. When a prisoner first leaves his cell he cannot bear the light of day; he is unable to discriminate colors or recognize faces. But the remedy is, not to remand him into his dungeon, but to accustom him to the rays of the sun. The blaze of truth and liberty may at first dazzle and bewilder nations which have become half blind in the house of bondage. But let them gaze on, and they will soon be able to bear it. In a few years men learn to reason. The extreme violence of opinions subsides. Hostile theories correct each other. The scattered elements of truth cease to contend, and begin to ^{unite} coalesce. And at length a system of justice and order is edu^ced out of the chaos.

Many politicians of our time are in the habit of laying it down as a self-evident proposition that no people ought to be free till they are fit to use their

freedom. The maxim is worthy of the fool in the old story, who resolved not to go into the water till he had learned to swim. If men are to wait for liberty till they become wise and good in slavery, they may indeed wait forever.

Therefore it is that we decidedly approve of the conduct of Milton and the other wise and good men who, in spite of much that was ridiculous and hateful in the conduct of their associates, stood firmly by the cause of public liberty. We are not aware that the poet has been charged with personal participation in any of the blamable excesses of that time. The favorite topic of his enemies is the line of conduct which he pursued with regard to the execution of the king. Of that celebrated proceeding we by no means approve. Still we must say, in justice to the many eminent persons who concurred in it, and in justice more particularly to the eminent person who defended it, that nothing can be more absurd than the imputations which, for the last hundred and sixty years, it has been the fashion to cast upon the Regicides.¹ We have, throughout, abstained from appealing to first principles. We will not appeal to them now. We recur again to the parallel case of the Revolution. *What* essential distinction can be drawn between the execution of the father and the deposition of the son? What constitutional maxim is there which applies to the former and not to the latter?

¹ Members of the High Court of Justice nominated by the "Rump" Parliament to try Charles I. There were one hundred and fifty members, of whom only sixty-seven were present at the trial. Several of these were afterwards executed. Three of them hid themselves in America. See Hawthorne's tale, *The Gray Champion*.

The king can do no wrong.¹ If so, James was as innocent as Charles could have been. The minister, only, ought to be responsible for the acts of the sovereign. If so, why not impeach Jeffreys² and retain James? The person of a king is sacred. Was the person of James considered sacred at the Boyne?³ To discharge cannon against an army in which a king is known to be posted is to approach pretty near to regicide. Charles, too, it should always be remembered, was put to death by men who had been exasperated by the hostilities of several years, and who had never been bound to him by any other tie than that which was common to them with all their fellow-citizens. Those who drove James from his throne, who seduced his army, who alienated his friends, who first imprisoned him in his palace and then turned him out of it, who broke in upon his very slumbers by imperious messages, who pursued him with fire and sword from one part of the empire to another, who hanged, drew, and quartered his adherents, and attainted his innocent heir,⁴ were his nephew and his

¹ The theory of English law which holds ministers responsible for the sovereign's acts.

² George Jeffreys (1648-1689), the notorious Chief Justice, Lord Chancellor, and adviser of James II., who after Monmouth's rebellion held the celebrated "Bloody Assizes" (1685) and earned a reputation for brutality and cruelty second to none.

³ The Boyne is a river in the north of Ireland where a decisive victory was won on July 1, 1690, by William over James. James does not appear to have risked his own person overmuch. The anniversary of the battle is still observed by the Orangemen. See Macaulay's *History*, chapter xvi.

⁴ James Francis Edward Stuart (1688-1766), son of James II. and Mary of Modena. His legitimacy was unjustly suspected, and he was attainted by Parliament. He was afterwards known

two daughters.¹ When we reflect on all these things, we are at a loss to conceive how the same persons who, on the 5th of November,² thank God for wonderfully conducting his servant William, and for making all opposition fall before him until he became our king and governor, can, on the 30th of January,³ contrive to be afraid that the blood of the Royal Martyr may be visited on themselves and their children. *Ch I execution anniversary*

We disapprove, we repeat, of the execution of Charles; not because the constitution exempts the king from responsibility, for we know that all such maxims, however excellent, have their exceptions; nor because we feel any peculiar interest in his character, for we think that his sentence describes him with perfect justice as "a tyrant, a traitor, a murderer, and a public enemy;" but because we are convinced that the measure was most injurious to the cause of freedom. He whom it removed was a captive and a hostage; his heir, to whom the allegiance of every Royalist was instantly transferred, was at large. The Presbyterians could never have been perfectly reconciled to the father; they had no such rooted enmity to the son. The great body of the people, also, contemplated that proceeding with feel-

as the Old Pretender (to distinguish him from his son, Charles Edward) and instigated the rising of 1715.

¹ William of Orange was the son of James's sister Mary and married his daughter Mary. James's other daughter, Anne, afterwards queen, took William's part.

² The anniversary of both the Gunpowder Plot and William's landing in England, marked in the English Prayer Book by a special "Form of Prayer and Thanksgiving," which was taken out, along with the service in memory of Charles I., in 1859.

³ The anniversary of Charles I.'s execution.

ings which, however unreasonable, no government could safely venture to outrage.¹

But though we think the conduct of the Regicides blamable, that of Milton appears to us in a very different light. The deed was done. It could not be undone. The evil was incurred, and the object was to render it as small as possible. We censure the chiefs of the army for not yielding to the popular opinion, but we cannot censure Milton for wishing to change that opinion. The very feeling which would have restrained us from committing the act would have led us, after it had been committed, to defend it against the ravings of servility and superstition. For the sake of public liberty, we wish that the thing had not been done while the people disapproved of it. But, for the sake of public liberty, we should also have wished the people to approve of it when it was done. If anything more were wanting to the justification of Milton, the book of Salmasius² would furnish it. That miserable performance is now with justice considered only as a beacon to word-catchers who wish to become statesmen. The celebrity of the man who refuted it, the "*Æneæ magni dextra*,"³ gives it all its fame with the present gener-

¹ Macaulay put substantially these reasons in Milton's mouth in the *Conversation* with Cowley.

² The Latinized name of the French scholar Claude Saumaise (1588-1653), then professor at Leyden. He had been lucky enough to discover the Palatine MS. of the Anthology (see page 44, note 3) and had won a great reputation for his erudition. He was therefore commissioned to write a *Defense of Charles I.*, which was a failure and is known only to antiquaries to-day for the reasons Macaulay assigns. See page 8, note 1.

³ Virgil, *Æneid*, x. 830, "*Æneæ magni dextra cadis*" — "thou fallest by the right hand of the great Æneas" — is a proverbial

ation. In that age the state of things was different. It was not then fully understood how vast an interval separates the mere classical scholar from the political philosopher. Nor can it be doubted that a treatise which, bearing the name of so eminent a critic, attacked the fundamental principles of all free governments, must, if suffered to remain unanswered, have produced a most pernicious effect on the public mind.

We wish to add a few words relative to another subject, on which the enemies of Milton delight to dwell, — his conduct during the administration of the Protector. That an enthusiastic votary of liberty should accept office under a military usurper seems, no doubt, at first sight, extraordinary. But all the circumstances in which the country was then placed were extraordinary. The ambition of Oliver was of no vulgar kind. He never seems to have coveted despotic power. He at first fought sincerely and manfully for the Parliament, and never deserted it till it had deserted its duty. If he dissolved it by force, it was not till he found that the few members who remained after so many deaths, secessions, and expulsions were desirous to appropriate to themselves a power which they held only in trust, and to inflict upon England the curse of a Venetian oligarchy.¹ But, even when thus placed by violence at the head of affairs, he did not assume unlimited power. He gave the country a constitution far more perfect than any which had at that time been known in the world.²

expression describing the fate suffered by an unknown person at the hands of a famous one.)

¹ Venice gradually fell into the hands of a small number of men, who governed more or less despotically.)

² The Instrument of Government (1653), which provided for

He reformed the representative system in a manner which has extorted praise even from Lord Clarendon. For himself he demanded, indeed, the first place in the Commonwealth, but with powers scarcely so great as those of a Dutch stadtholder¹ or an American president. He gave the Parliament a voice in the appointment of ministers, and left to it the whole legislative authority, not even reserving to himself a veto on its enactments; and he did not require that the chief magistracy should be hereditary in his family. Thus far, we think, if the circumstances of the time and the opportunities which he had of aggrandizing himself be fairly considered, he will not lose by comparison with Washington or Bolivar.² Had his moderation been met by corresponding moderation, there is no reason to think that he would have overstepped the line which he had traced for himself. But when he found that his Parliaments questioned the authority under which they met, and that he was in danger of being deprived of the restricted power which was absolutely necessary to his personal safety, then it must be acknowledged he adopted a more arbitrary policy.

Yet, though we believe that the intentions of Cromwell were at first honest, though we believe that he was driven from the noble course which he had marked out for himself by the almost irresistible

the annual meeting of a parliament, representing England, Scotland, and Ireland, did away with rotten boroughs and widened the franchise.

¹ That is, governor of a province, a title which came to mean the chief executive of the United Provinces.

² Simon Bolivar (1783-1830), the "Liberator," was the leader in the revolt of the South American colonies against Spain.

force of circumstances, though we admire, in common with all men of all parties, the ability and energy of his splendid administration, we are not pleading for arbitrary and lawless power, even in his hands. We know that a good constitution is infinitely better than the best despot. But we suspect that, at the time of which we speak, the violence of religious and political enmities rendered a stable and happy settlement next to impossible. The choice lay, not between Cromwell and liberty, but between Cromwell and the Stuarts. That Milton chose well no man can doubt who fairly compares the events of the Protectorate with those of the thirty years which succeeded it, the darkest and most disgraceful in the English annals. Cromwell was evidently laying, though in an irregular manner, the foundations of an admirable system. Never before had religious liberty and the freedom of discussion been enjoyed in a greater degree. Never had the national honor been better upheld abroad, or the seat of justice better filled at home. And it was rarely that any opposition which stopped short of open rebellion provoked the resentment of the liberal and magnanimous usurper. The institutions which he had established, as set down in the Instrument of Government and the Humble Petition and Advice,¹ were excellent. His practice, it is true, too often departed from the theory of these institutions. But had he lived a few years longer, it is probable that his institutions would have survived him, and that his arbitrary practice would have died with him. His

¹ The petition that Cromwell accept the title of king, and govern with the advice of two Houses of Parliament. This was accepted in May, 1657, with the rejection, however, of the title of king.

power had not been consecrated by ancient prejudices. It was upheld only by his great personal qualities. Little, therefore, was to be dreaded from a second Protector, unless he were also a second Oliver Cromwell. The events which followed his decease are the most complete vindication of those who exerted themselves to uphold his authority. His death dissolved the whole frame of society. The army rose against the Parliament, the different corps of the army against each other. Sect raved against sect. Party plotted against party. The Presbyterians, in their eagerness to be revenged on the Independents,¹ sacrificed their own liberty, and deserted all their old principles. Without casting one glance on the past, or requiring one stipulation for the future, they threw down their freedom at the feet of the most frivolous and heartless of tyrants.

Then came those days, never to be recalled without a blush, the days of servitude without loyalty and sensuality without love; of dwarfish talents and gigantic vices; the paradise of cold hearts and narrow minds; the golden age of the coward, the bigot, and the slave. The king cringed to his rival² that he might trample on his people; sank into a viceroy of France, and pocketed with complacent infamy her degrading insults and her more degrading gold.³ The caresses of harlots and the jests of buffoons regulated the policy of the state. The government had just ability enough to deceive, and just religion

¹ Those who, unlike the Presbyterians and Churchmen, desired no general church government. Milton sided with them.

² Louis XIV., of France.

³ See Green, and especially the details as to the secret Treaty of Dover (1670).

enough to persecute. The principles of liberty were the scoff of every grinning courtier, and the *Anathema Maranatha*¹ of every fawning dean. In every high place, worship was paid to Charles and James, Belial and Moloch;² and England propitiated those obscene and cruel idols with the blood of her best and bravest children. Crime succeeded to crime, and disgrace to disgrace, till the race, accursed of God and man, was a second time driven forth to wander on the face of the earth, and to be a byword and a shaking of the head to the nations. *End for Friday.*

Most of the remarks which we have hitherto made on the public character of Milton apply to him only as one of a large body. We shall proceed to notice some of the peculiarities which distinguished him from his contemporaries. And for that purpose it is necessary to take a short survey of the parties into which the political world was at that time divided. We must premise that our observations are intended to apply only to those who adhered, from a sincere preference, to one or to the other side. In days of public commotion every faction, like an Oriental army, is attended by a crowd of camp-followers, a useless and heartless rabble, who prowl round its line of march in the hope of picking up something under its protection, but desert it in the day of battle, and often join to exterminate it after a defeat. England, at the time of which we are treating, abounded

¹ 1 Corinthians xvi. 22. The phrase is partly Greek, partly Syriac, and in the revised version is properly separated by a period. *Anathema* is, Let him be accursed. The apostle then turns to the believers, and says to them, *Maran atha*, i. e., Our Lord cometh.

² See Milton's description of these fiends in *Paradise Lost*, ii. 43-225.

with fickle and selfish politicians, who transferred their support to every government as it rose; who kissed the hand of the king in 1640, and spat in his face in 1649; who shouted with equal glee when Cromwell was inaugurated in Westminster Hall, and when he was dug up to be hanged at Tyburn; who dined on calves' heads or on broiled rumps, and cut down oak branches or stuck them up, as circumstances altered, without the slightest shame or repugnance.¹ These we leave out of the account. We take our estimate of parties from those who really deserve to be called partisans.

We would speak first of the Puritans, the most remarkable body of men, perhaps, which the world has ever produced. The odious and ridiculous parts of their character lie on the surface. He that runs may read them; nor have there been wanting attentive and malicious observers to point them out. For many years after the Restoration they were the theme of unmeasured invective and derision. They were exposed to the utmost licentiousness of the press and of the stage, at the time when the press and the stage were most licentious. They were not men of letters; they were, as a body, unpopular; they could not defend themselves; and the public would not take them under its protection. They were therefore abandoned, without reserve, to the tender mercies of the satirists

¹ The references are (1) to the assembling of the Long Parliament; (2) to the beheading of the king; (3) to the inauguration of the Protector in 1653; (4) to the treatment of his body after the Restoration (Tyburn being the place of execution of common malefactors); (5) to popular demonstrations of the rebels and the king's men, the latter of whom, of course, despised the Rump Parliament and rejoiced at Prince Charles' escape after Worcester by hiding in the historic oak.

and dramatists. The ostentatious simplicity of their dress, their sour aspect, their nasal twang, their stiff posture, their long graces, their Hebrew names, the scriptural phrases which they introduced on every occasion, their contempt of human learning, their detestation of polite amusements, were indeed fair game for the laughers. But it is not from the laughers alone that the philosophy of history is to be learned. And he who approaches this subject should carefully guard against the influence of that potent ridicule which has already misled so many excellent writers.

“Ecco il fonte del riso, ed ecco il rio
 Che mortali perigli in se contiene :
 Hor qui tener a fren nostro desio,
 Ed esser cauti molto a noi conviene.”¹

Those who roused the people to resistance; who directed their measures through a long series of eventful years; who formed, out of the most unpromising materials, the finest army that Europe had ever seen; who trampled down king, church, and aristocracy; who, in the short intervals of domestic sedition and rebellion, made the name of England terrible to every nation on the face of the earth, — were no vulgar fanatics. Most of their absurdities were mere external badges, like the signs of freemasonry or the dresses of friars.² We regret that these badges were

¹ “See here the fount of laughter! see the stream
 To which such fatal qualities belong!”

“Now,” they exclaim’d, ‘let us avoid the dream
 Of warm desire, and in resolve be strong.’”

Tasso, *Jerusalem Delivered*, xv. 57, Fairfax’s translation.

² Friars is the general title of the four mendicant orders of monks: the Franciscans, the Dominicans, the Carmelites, and the Augustinians. They were at the height of their influence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

not more attractive. We regret that a body to whose courage and talents mankind has owed inestimable obligations, had not the lofty elegance which distinguished some of the adherents of Charles I., or the easy good-breeding for which the court of Charles II. was celebrated. But, if we must make our choice, we shall, like Bassanio¹ in the play, turn from the specious caskets which contain only the death's-head and the fool's-head, and fix on the plain leaden chest which conceals the treasure.

The Puritans were men whose minds had derived a peculiar character from the daily contemplation of superior beings and eternal interests. Not content with acknowledging in general terms an overruling Providence, they habitually ascribed every event to the will of the Great Being, for whose power nothing was too vast, for whose inspection nothing was too minute. To know Him, to serve Him, to enjoy Him, was with them the great end of existence. They rejected with contempt the ceremonious homage which other sects substituted for the pure worship of the soul. Instead of catching occasional glimpses of the Deity through an obscuring veil, they aspired to gaze full on the intolerable brightness, and to commune with Him face to face. Hence originated their contempt for terrestrial distinctions. The difference between the greatest and the meanest of mankind seemed to vanish when compared with the boundless interval which separated the whole race from Him on whom their own eyes were constantly fixed. They recognized no title to superiority but His favor; and, confident of that favor, they despised all the accomplishments and all the dignities of the world. If they

¹ See *Merchant of Venice*, III. ii.

were unacquainted with the works of philosophers and poets, they were deeply read in the oracles of God. If their names were not found in the registers of heralds, they were recorded in the Book of Life. If their steps were not accompanied by a splendid train of menials, legions of ministering angels had charge over them. Their palaces were houses not made with hands; their diadems, crowns of glory which should never fade away. On the rich and the eloquent, on nobles and priests, they looked down with contempt; for they esteemed themselves rich in a more precious treasure, and eloquent in a more sublime language, nobles by the right of an earlier creation, and priests by the imposition of a mightier hand.¹ The very meanest of them was a being to whose fate a mysterious and terrible importance belonged, on whose slightest action the spirits of light and darkness looked with anxious interest; who had been destined, before heaven and earth were created, to enjoy a felicity which should continue when heaven and earth should have passed away. Events which short-sighted politicians ascribed to earthly causes had been ordained on his account. For his sake empires had risen, and flourished, and decayed. For his sake the Almighty had proclaimed His will by the pen of the Evangelist and the harp of the prophet. He had been wrested by no common deliverer from the grasp of no common foe. He had been ransomed by the sweat of no vulgar agony, by the blood of no earthly sacrifice. It was for him that the sun had been darkened, that the rocks had been rent, that the dead had

¹ "Creation" is the technical term for the making of a peer. Priests are, of course, ordained by the "imposition" of the bishop's hands.

risen, that all nature had shuddered at the sufferings of her expiring God.

Thus the Puritan was made up of two different men: the one all self-abasement, penitence, gratitude, passion; the other proud, calm, inflexible, sagacious. He prostrated himself in the dust before his Maker, but he set his foot on the neck of his king. In his devotional retirement, he prayed with convulsions, and groans, and tears. He was half maddened by glorious or terrible illusions. He heard the lyres of angels or the tempting whispers of fiends. He caught a gleam of the Beatific Vision,¹ or woke screaming from dreams of everlasting fire. Like Vane,² he thought himself intrusted with the sceptre of the millennial year. Like Fleetwood,³ he cried in the bitterness of his soul that God had hid His face from him. But when he took his seat in the council, or girt on his sword for war, these tempestuous workings of the soul had left no perceptible trace behind them. People who saw nothing of the godly but their uncouth visages, and heard nothing from them but their

¹ The Beatific Vision in mediæval theology meant the direct sight of God himself, which constituted the essential happiness of the saints in heaven. See Dante's *Paradiso*, xxxiii.

² Sir Harry Vane the younger (1612–1662), Puritan, mystic, and intense republican, was Governor of Massachusetts Bay, where he got into trouble (1636–37). Then he took sides against the king, then against Cromwell, and was finally executed as a regicide. He believed in the speedy coming of the millennium, or thousand years of Christ's acknowledged supremacy over the nations. Milton addressed his seventeenth sonnet to him,—a magnificent tribute somewhat undeserved.

³ Charles Fleetwood (born 1620?, died shortly after 1690) was a major-general in the army and Cromwell's son-in-law. He tried to supplant Richard Cromwell, but had not the necessary strength of character.

groans and their whining hymns, might laugh at them. But those had little reason to laugh who encountered them in the hall of debate or in the field of battle. These fanatics brought to civil and military affairs a coolness of judgment and an immutability of purpose which some writers have thought inconsistent with their religious zeal, but which were in fact the necessary effects of it. The intensity of their feelings on one subject made them tranquil on every other. One overpowering sentiment had subjected to itself pity and hatred, ambition and fear. Death had lost its terrors and pleasure its charms. They had their smiles and their tears, their raptures and their sorrows, but not for the things of this world. Enthusiasm had made them Stoics, had cleared their minds from every vulgar passion and prejudice, and raised them above the influence of danger and of corruption. It sometimes might lead them to pursue unwise ends, but never to choose unwise means. They went through the world, like Sir Artegal's iron man Talus¹ with his flail, crushing and trampling down oppressors, mingling with human beings, but having neither part nor lot in human infirmities; insensible to fatigue, to pleasure, and to pain; not to be pierced by any weapon, not to be withstood by any barrier.

Such we believe to have been the character of the Puritans. We perceive the absurdity of their manners. We dislike the sullen gloom of their domestic habits. We acknowledge that the tone of their minds was often injured by straining after things too high for mortal reach; and we know that, in spite of their hatred of Popery, they too often fell into the worst vices of that bad system, — intolerance and extrava-

¹ See the *Faerie Queene*, v. Artegal represents Justice.

gant austerity; that they had their anchorites and their crusades, their Dunstans¹ and their De Montforts,² their Dominics³ and their Escobars.⁴ Yet, when all circumstances are taken into consideration, we do not hesitate to pronounce them a brave, a wise, an honest, and a useful body.

The Puritans espoused the cause of civil liberty mainly because it was the cause of religion. There was another party, by no means numerous, but distinguished by learning and ability, which acted with them on very different principles. We speak of those whom Cromwell was accustomed to call the Heathens, men who were, in the phraseology of that time, doubting Thomases or careless Gallios⁵ with regard to religious subjects, but passionate worshipers of freedom. Heated by the study of ancient literature, they set up their country as their idol, and proposed to themselves the heroes of Plutarch as their examples. They seem to have borne some resemblance to the Brissotines⁶ of the French Revolution.

¹ The great Anglo-Saxon Archbishop of Canterbury, who regulated the clergy under Edgar (*circa* 959).

² Simon de Montfort (died 1218), father of the greater English statesman of the same name, was notorious for his cruelty in Innocent III.'s crusade against the Albigenses in Provence (1208).

³ St. Dominic (1170–1221) was a Spanish monk, associated with de Montfort in his cruelties, and founder of the Dominican Friars, who were great heretic hunters as well as learned preachers. See page 71, note 2.

⁴ Antonio Escobar (1589–1669), a noted Spanish Jesuit, who wrote casuistical treatises on morals to the amount of forty folio volumes. He held that the end might justify the means, and was criticised for this by Pascal.

⁵ See Acts xviii. 17.

⁶ The moderate republicans in the French Revolution, better known as Girondists.

But it is not very easy to draw the line of distinction between them and their devout associates, whose tone and manner they sometimes found it convenient to affect, and sometimes, it is probable, imperceptibly adopted.

We now come to the Royalists. We shall attempt to speak of them, as we have spoken of their antagonists, with perfect candor. We shall not charge upon a whole party the profligacy and baseness of the horse boys, gamblers, and bravoës, whom the hope of license and plunder attracted from all the dens of Whitefriars¹ to the standard of Charles, and who disgraced their associates by excesses which, under the stricter discipline of the parliamentary armies, were never tolerated. We will select a more favorable specimen. Thinking as we do that the cause of the king was the cause of bigotry and tyranny, we yet cannot refrain from looking with complacency on the character of the honest old Cavaliers. We feel a national pride in comparing them with the instruments which the despots of other countries are compelled to employ, — with the mutes who throng their ante-chambers, and the Janissaries² who mount guard at their gates. Our Royalist countrymen were not heartless, dangling courtiers, bowing at every step, and simpering at every word. They were not mere machines for destruction, dressed up in uniforms,

¹ A district in London, which, on account of old privileges preventing the arrest of its inhabitants, was long the home of ruffians and idlers.

² A famous body of infantry, serving as the Sultan's guard and the main part of the standing army, largely composed of conscripts taken from the Christian subjects of Turkey. Becoming dangerous, they were exterminated in 1826, having been in existence since the fourteenth century.

caned into skill, intoxicated into valor, defending without love, destroying without hatred. There was a freedom in their subserviency, a nobleness in their very degradation. The sentiment of individual independence was strong within them. They were indeed misled, but by no base or selfish motive. Compassion and romantic honor, the prejudices of childhood and the venerable names of history, threw over them a spell potent as that of Duessa; and, like the Red Cross Knight,¹ they thought that they were doing battle for an injured beauty while they defended a false and loathsome sorceress. In truth, they scarcely entered at all into the merits of the political question. It was not for a treacherous king or an intolerant church that they fought, but for the old banner which had waved in so many battles over the heads of their fathers, and for the altars at which they had received the hands of their brides. Though nothing could be more erroneous than their political opinions, they possessed, in a far greater degree than their adversaries, those qualities which are the grace of private life. With many of the vices of the Round Table,² they had also many of its virtues, — courtesy, generosity, veracity, tenderness, and respect for women. They had far more both of profound and of polite learning than the Puritans. Their manners were more engaging, their tempers more amiable, their tastes more elegant, and their households more cheerful.

Milton did not strictly belong to any of the classes

¹ See *The Faerie Queene*, i.

² Tennyson's *Last Tournament*, though not one of the best of the *Idylls*, describes the vices that undermined King Arthur's noble institution.

which we have described. He was not a Puritan. He was not a freethinker. He was not a Royalist. In his character the noblest qualities of every party were combined in harmonious union. From the Parliament and from the court, from the conventicle and from the Gothic cloister, from the gloomy and sepulchral circles of the Roundheads, and from the Christmas revel of the hospitable Cavalier, his nature selected and drew to itself whatever was great and good, while it rejected all the base and pernicious ingredients by which those finer elements were defiled. Like the Puritans, he lived

“As ever in his great Taskmaster’s eye.”¹

Like them, he kept his mind continually fixed on an Almighty Judge and an eternal reward. And hence he acquired their contempt of external circumstances, their fortitude, their tranquillity, their inflexible resolution. But not the coolest skeptic or the most profane scoffer was more perfectly free from the contagion of their frantic delusions, their savage manners, their ludicrous jargon,² their scorn of science, and their aversion to pleasure. Hating tyranny with a perfect hatred, he had nevertheless all the estimable and ornamental qualities which were almost entirely monopolized by the party of the tyrant. There was none who had a stronger sense of the value of literature, a finer relish for every elegant amusement, or a more chivalrous delicacy of honor and love. Though his opinions were democratic, his tastes and his associations were such as harmonize best with monarchy and aristocracy. He was under the influence of all

¹ From Milton’s fine seventh sonnet, written “on his having arrived at the age of twenty-three.”

² That is, their peculiar application of scriptural language.

the feelings by which the gallant Cavaliers were misled. But of those feelings he was the master and not the slave. Like the hero¹ of Homer, he enjoyed all the pleasures of fascination; but he was not fascinated. He listened to the song of the Sirens, yet he glided by without being seduced to their fatal shore. He tasted the cup of Circe, but he bore about him a sure antidote against the effects of its bewitching sweetness. The illusions which captivated his imagination never impaired his reasoning powers. The statesman was proof against the splendor, the solemnity, and the romance which enchanted the poet. Any person who will contrast the sentiments expressed in his treatises on Prelacy² with the exquisite lines on ecclesiastical architecture and music in the "Penseroso,"³ which was published about the same time, will understand our meaning. This is an inconsistency which, more than anything else, raises his character in our estimation, because it shows how many private tastes and feelings he sacrificed in order to do what ~~at~~ he considered his duty to mankind. It is the very struggle of the noble Othello.⁴ His heart relents, but his hand is firm. He does naught in hate, but all in honor. He kisses the beautiful deceiver before he destroys her.

¹ Ulysses. See *Odyssey*, x. and xii.

² That is, the prose pamphlets, *Of Reformation touching Church Discipline in England, Of Prelatical Episcopacy, The Reason of Church Government urg'd against Prelaty*, etc., all dating from 1641.

³ The lines are 155-166. *Il Penseroso* was first published in the 1645 edition of Milton's collected *Minor Poems*. It had been written from twelve to fourteen years earlier.

⁴ See Act V., scene ii., of the play which Macaulay, writing the year before of Dante, had declared to be "perhaps the greatest work in the world."

[That from which the public character of Milton derives its great and peculiar splendor still remains to be mentioned. If he exerted himself to overthrow a forsworn king and a persecuting hierarchy, he exerted himself in conjunction with others. But the glory of the battle which he fought for the species of freedom which is the most valuable, and which was then the least understood, the freedom of the human mind, is all his own. Thousands and tens of thousands among his contemporaries raised their voices against ship money and the Star Chamber. But there were few indeed who discerned the more fearful evils of moral and intellectual slavery, and the benefits which would result from the liberty of the press¹ and the unfettered exercise of private judgment.² These were the objects which Milton justly conceived to be the most important. He was desirous that the people should think for themselves as well as tax themselves, and should be emancipated from the dominion of prejudice as well as from that of Charles. He knew that those who, with the best intentions, overlooked these schemes of reform, and contented themselves with pulling down the king and imprisoning the malignants,³ acted like the heedless brothers in his own poem,⁴ who, in their eagerness to disperse

¹ It was in defense of the liberty of the press that Milton published, in 1644, his *Areopagitica*, probably the finest and certainly the most often read of his prose works.

² Most of the early prose tracts would seem to fall under this head.

³ That is, virulently harmful (to the cause of liberty),—a term much applied by the Parliament men to the king's supporters.

⁴ *Comus*. The lines below are 815–819. At the beginning of the next paragraph Macaulay, by paraphrasing, explains the quotation.

the train of the sorcerer, neglected the means of liberating the captive. They thought only of conquering when they should have thought of disenchanting.

“ Oh, ye mistook, ye should have snatch’d his wand,
And bound him fast ; without his rod revers’d,
And backward mutters of dissevering power,
We cannot free the Lady that sits here
In stony fetters fix’d, and motionless.”

To reverse the rod, to spell the charm backward, to break the ties which bound a stupefied people to the seat of enchantment, was the noble aim of Milton. To this all his public conduct was directed. For this he joined the Presbyterians; for this he forsook them. He fought their perilous battle, but he turned away with disdain from their insolent triumph. He saw that they, like those whom they had vanquished, were hostile to the liberty of thought. He therefore joined the Independents, and called upon Cromwell to break the secular chain, and to save free conscience from the paw of the Presbyterian wolf.¹ With a view to the same great object, he attacked the licensing system,² in that sublime treatise which every statesman should wear as a sign upon his hand and as frontlets between his eyes. His attacks were, in general, directed less against particular abuses than against those deeply seated errors on which almost all abuses are founded, — the servile worship of eminent men and the irrational dread of innovation. {

¹ “Secular chain” (see Sonnet xvi.) refers to the alliance between church and state. In *Lycidas* (l. 128), “the grim wolf with privy paw” was probably the Church of Rome; but this was written in 1637, when Laud’s leaning toward Rome terrified the poet. Later, it was the narrow policy of the Presbyterians that alarmed him.

² That is, as applied to publications. See the *Areopagitica*.

That he might shake the foundations of these debasing sentiments more effectually, he always selected for himself the boldest literary services. He never came up in the rear when the outworks had been carried and the breach entered. He pressed into the forlorn hope. At the beginning of the changes, he wrote with incomparable energy and eloquence against the bishops. But, when his opinion seemed likely to prevail, he passed on to other subjects, and abandoned prelacy to the crowd of writers who now hastened to insult a falling party. There is no more hazardous enterprise than that of bearing the torch of truth into those dark and infected recesses in which no light has ever shone. But it was the choice and the pleasure of Milton to penetrate the noisome vapors, and to brave the terrible explosion. Those who most disapprove of his opinions must respect the hardihood with which he maintained them. He, in general, left to others the credit of expounding and defending the popular parts of his religious and political creed. He took his own stand upon those which the great body of his countrymen reprobated as criminal, or derided as paradoxical. He stood up for divorce and regicide.¹ He attacked the prevailing systems of education.² His radiant and beneficent career resembled that of the god of light and fertility:—

“Nitor in adversum ; nec me, qui cætera, vincit
Impetus, et rapido contrarius evehor orbi.”³

¹ *Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* (1643), and other tracts; *Eikonoklastes* (1649), the *Defensio contra Salmasium*, etc.

² *Of Education. To Master S. Hartlib* (1644).

³ From Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ii. 72, 73 : “I contend against opposition ; nor does that force which conquers all else subdue me, and I ride on in a contrary way to the rapid heavens.” The reference is, of course, to the sun.

It is to be regretted that the prose writings of Milton should in our time be so little read. As compositions, they deserve the attention of every man who wishes to become acquainted with the full power of the English language. They abound with passages compared with which the finest declamations of Burke¹ sink into insignificance. They are a perfect field of cloth of gold.² The style is stiff with gorgeous embroidery. Not even in the earlier books of the "Paradise Lost" has the great poet ever risen higher than in those parts of his controversial works in which his feelings, excited by conflict, find a vent in bursts of devotional and lyric rapture. It is, to borrow his own majestic language, "a sevenfold chorus of hallelujahs and harping symphonies."

We had intended to look more closely at these performances, to analyze the peculiarities of the diction, to dwell at some length on the sublime wisdom of the "Arcopagitica" and the nervous rhetoric of the "Iconoclast," and to point out some of those magnificent passages which occur in the treatise "Of Reformation"³ and the "Animadversions on the Remon-

¹ The great philosophic statesman Edmund Burke (1729-1797), noted for the splendor of his style. The student may compare the superb passage from the opening of the Second Book of *The Reason of Church Government* (from which Macaulay quotes at the close of the paragraph) with Burke's tribute to Marie Antoinette at the beginning of his *Reflections on the French Revolution*.

² This refers to the great meeting between Henry VIII. and Francis I. in 1520, on the plain of Ardres.

³ Published in 1641. A reply to Bishop Hall, who had attacked a famous Presbyterian tract known by the curious name of *Smectymnuus*, — formed from the initials of its authors.

strant." But the length to which our remarks have already extended renders this impossible.

We must conclude. And yet we can scarcely tear ourselves away from the subject. The days immediately following the publication of this relic of Milton appear to be peculiarly set apart and consecrated to his memory. And we shall scarcely be censured if, on this his festival, we be found lingering near his shrine, how worthless soever may be the offering which we bring to it. While this book lies on our table, we seem to be contemporaries of the writer. We are transported a hundred and fifty years back. We can almost fancy that we are visiting him in his small lodging; that we see him sitting at the old organ beneath the faded green hangings; that we can catch the quick twinkle of his eyes, rolling in vain to find the day; that we are reading in the lines of his noble countenance the proud and mournful history of his glory and his affliction.¹ We image to ourselves the breathless silence in which we should listen to his slightest word; the passionate veneration with which we should kneel to kiss his hand and weep upon it; the earnestness with which we should endeavor to console him, if indeed such a spirit could need consolation, for the neglect of an age unworthy of his talents and his virtues; the eagerness with which we should contest with his daughters, or with his Quaker friend Ellwood,² the privilege of reading Homer to

¹ These details are taken from the notes of the painter Richardson, and were furnished by a Doctor Wright, an old clergyman who visited the poet. (Masson, *Memoir* prefixed to the Eversley edition of the poems.)

² Thomas Ellwood (1639-1713), a Quaker, who underwent much persecution for his faith, made the acquaintance of Milton in 1662, and became his fast friend and assistant in his work.

him, or of taking down the immortal accents which flowed from his lips.

These are perhaps foolish feelings. Yet we cannot be ashamed of them; nor shall we be sorry if what we have written shall in any degree excite them in other minds. We are not much in the habit of idolizing either the living or the dead. And we think that there is no more certain indication of a weak and ill-regulated intellect than that propensity which, for want of a better name, we will venture to christen Boswellism. But there are a few characters which have stood the closest scrutiny and the severest tests, which have been tried in the furnace and have proved pure, which have been weighed in the balance and have not been found wanting, which have been declared sterling by the general consent of mankind, and which are visibly stamped with the image and superscription of the Most High. These great men we trust that we know how to prize, and of these was Milton. The sight of his books, the sound of his name, are pleasant to us. His thoughts resemble those celestial fruits and flowers which the Virgin Martyr¹ of Massinger sent down from the gardens of Paradise to the earth, and which were distinguished from the productions of other soils, not only by superior bloom and sweetness, but by miraculous efficacy to invigorate and to heal. They are powerful, not only to delight, but to elevate and purify. Nor do we envy the man who can study either the life or the

He has left in his *Autobiography* many interesting details with regard to his intercourse with the poet, whom he somewhat incited to write *Paradise Regained*. See Whittier's *Snow-Bound*.

¹ One of the best of the plays of Philip Massinger (1583-1640), the last of the great Elizabethan dramatists.

writings of the great poet and patriot without aspiring to emulate, not indeed the sublime works with which his genius has enriched our literature, but the zeal with which he labored for the public good, the fortitude with which he endured every private calamity, the lofty disdain with which he looked down on temptations and dangers, the deadly hatred which he bore to bigots and tyrants, and the faith which he so sternly kept with his country and with his fame.¹

¹ Matthew Arnold (in *A French Critic on Milton*) finds fault with the rhetoric of this passage, and justly, if we are to consider Macaulay as playing the part of a critic. But Arnold here, as elsewhere, seems not sufficiently to remember that criticism is not the whole end of literature. Macaulay was endeavoring to persuade his readers to catch some of his own enthusiasm for Milton, — a worthy purpose, which was furthered by his remarkably effective rhetoric.

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